DALIT PANTHERS

An Authoritative History

J.V. PAWAR,
Co-founder

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Dedicated to

Bhagwat Jadhav

who became the first martyr of the Dalit Panther movement on 10 January 1974

Ramesh Deorukhkar

who was killed in police firing in the Worli riots in January 1974

Vasant Dhamankar

who died on 28 October 1974 in Nagpur, after the first Dalit Panthers' convention

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J.V. PAWAR

Translated from Marathi by Rakshit Sonawane

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DALIT PANTHERS: An Authoritative History
(History of a Social Movement)
By J.V. Pawar

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Preface

The golden period of the Ambedkarite movement after the demise of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar belonged to the Dalit Panther. The militant organization was formed on 29 May 1972. Five years later, it was disbanded through a declaration at a press conference held in Mumbai on 7 March 1977. An ideological schism among its leaders prompted Namdeo Dhasal to sack Raja Dhale and J.V. Pawar by announcing it in the newspapers published from Mumbai on 30 September 1974. It culminated in Dhasal being sacked at the first convention of the organization held in Nagpur on 23 and 24 October 1974. In June 1975, then prime minister Indira Gandhi declared Emergency in India, imposing restrictions on newspapers and organizations. Hence, the period from May 1972 to June 1975 was most crucial in the activities of the Dalit Panther movement.

During this period, the Dalit Panther movement caused a storm, shattering contemporary sociopolitical ethos and recharging Ambedkar's followers to combat rising injustice and atrocities. It transformed youths, who took to the streets as committed footsoldiers of the movement, took on the system and provided relief to the victims. During its short life, the organization shook up the government from its slumber and forced it to take note of the plight of the oppressed people. The struggle of the Dalit Panther movement was not just for the economic upliftment of the Dalits but also for the implementation of their Constitutional rights and the establishment of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The Dalit Panther was at its prime until 4 January 1974. On 5 January 1974, a masterminded riot engulfed the entire Mumbai me-

tropolis, especially Worli and Naigaon, and claimed the lives of Dalit Panthers Bhagwat Jadhav and Ramesh Deorukhkar. The riot devastated the lives of numerous youngsters, who lost their jobs and had to languish in prisons. Their sacrifices, however, rejuvenated the Ambedkarite movement, in sharp contrast to those who had mortgaged it at the feet of the rich and the powerful in return for crumbs of power and wealth. During its short life, the Dalit Panther made a lasting impact on Indian society and politics. The impact of the movement has been so historic that after four members of a Dalit family (including a woman and her teenage daughter) were brutally killed in Khairlanji village in Bhandara district of Maharashtra in 2006, there were spontaneous demands for a militant organization like the Dalit Panther to take on the perpetrators of caste atrocities.

A lot has been written on the movement, including research papers and anthologies, based on information gathered from newspapers and conversations with the people who were in the movement. The movement has been analyzed and interpreted by many to suit their convenience or ideological stance, often veering off on the verge of distorting history. For the sake of easy publicity and the consequent gains, many people masqueraded as experts on the movement, including some claiming to have fathered it. I have been a witness of this period from day one. I have actively participated in the movement, not just as a spectator or a writer, but as one of the people who initiated it. Hence, while assigning the paternity of the Dalit Panther organization to Namdeo Dhasal and myself, I consider the nurturing of the movement by Raja Dhale as important.

I feel that only three persons can write the history of the Dalit Panther movement: Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and J.V.Pawar (myself). I was the organizer and later, the general secretary of the organization and therefore I am in possession of all the relevant correspondence and documentation. During those days, there were no photocopying machines and I had to use carbon paper to make copies of letters or statements, all of which I have preserved. What this means is that my writing is authentic and supported by docu-

ments. Besides, the Government of Maharashtra gave me access to its archives, including documents from the police and intelligence departments, which further enriched me.

I have written a series in Marathi on "The Ambedkarite movement after Dr B.R. Ambedkar" and this book is the fourth in the series. The era of the Dalit Panther was the glowing period about which many people, including Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and other intellectuals have already written.

During the days of the Dalit Panther, Marathi newspaper *Nava Kaal*, founded by its editor Neelubhau Khadilkar, had opened its door for us, as if it were our mouthpiece. There were several other newspapers like *Nav Shakti*, *Maratha*, *Maharashtra Times*, *Loksatta* and *Sakaal*, which helped the movement by publicizing its activities. I am indebted to all of them.

Since Babasaheb Ambedkar's *Mahaparinirvana* on 6 December 1956, the Ambedkarite movement has tasted both victory and defeat. The victory has been that the movement has, through the years, attained social, educational, and cultural maturity. In the literature and the arts, the movement reached the pinnacle at various moments – especially Ambedkarite literature, which has now gained respect and acceptance as the only literature that matters, because it is based on realism. So much so that what was so far called Dalit Literature is now referred to as Ambedkarite literature. The conditions in society today are vastly different from those prevailing in the pre-Ambedkar era and the transformation can be attributed to Ambedkar's call to educate, organize and agitate.

I am not an activist or a writer from Ambedkar's time. During Ambedkar's time, many people contributed to the journals he edited — *Mook Nayak* and *Prabuddha Bharat*. But they were simply chroniclers of that age. However, C.B. Khairmode's documentation remains quite invaluable. I did not want to merely document the post-Ambedkarite movement but also analyze it. I was involved in the movement myself. I wasn't merely an observer sitting on the sidelines. I can, therefore, stake my claim to analyze the history of the movement. Apart from being at the forefront of the movement since 1972, I led the student wing of Dadasaheb Gaikwad's popular

land-agitation movement in 1964.

In 1972, with my poet-friend Namdeo Dhasal, I co-founded the Dalit Panther. Although it was a short-lived movement, just like the Black Panther in the United States, among all the post-Ambedkarite movements, the Dalit Panther enjoys the greatest admiration.

It was the period of struggle and hardships that earned Dalit Panthers their credibility and reputation in society. What Babasaheb Ambedkar had envisaged for the Republican Party of India (RPI) had failed to materialize. The post-Ambedkarite movement had begun to decline in the 1960s due to the ulterior motives of the Republican Party leaders – and today the party has become an object of ridicule. Instead of concentrating on RPI's growth, its leaders helped strengthen the Congress party. The Congress party thus became more arrogant and exploitative. In the rural areas, it was Dalit Panthers who tried to stem the atrocities that were being inflicted on the Dalits. There was a growing consciousness among the Dalit masses that there was a group and an organization to protect them. Even today, when Dalits in villages face atrocities, people yearn for the resurgence of a movement like the Dalit Panther.

This wish in people's hearts can be seen as the greatest recognition of the Dalit Panther among the masses. Even when the movement spread from Maharashtra to the rest of the country, it never spread itself too thin. Social scientists have realized the importance of the Dalit Panthers. Even today, both Indians and foreigners seek to understand and analyze the history of the Dalit Panther. Researchers and students are still mesmerized by its history. The militant activism of the Dalit Panther is one that needs to be revived, hence the need to translate this work into Hindi and English. I published this history of Dalit Panthers in Marathi on 6 December 2010, under the title *Dalit Panthers*. It was well received by Marathi readers and activists.

Since researchers and scholars worldwide studying the Dalit Panther movement seek information from us, I felt there was a need to publish this material in Hindi and English. Angela Davis from the Black Panther, USA, on her visit to India on 16 December 2016, had expressed her desire to me for an English translation of

Dalit Panthers, for the benefit of the African-American brothers and sisters involved in their struggle in the USA.

I am indebted to my senior colleague Rakshit Sonawane, who translated *Dalit Panthers* from Marathi into English. This is the second book of mine that he has translated; *Dr B.R. Ambedkar's Social Revolution* was published on the eve of the 125th birth anniversary of Dr Ambedkar. Yogesh Maitreya translated my first book into English.

I owe my gratitude to Balasaheb Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ambedkar, Dr Harshdeep Kamble, Dr Shridhar Pawar, Vivek Pawar, Ashok Sonune, Subhodh More, Sumedh Jadhav, Nagesh Sawant, Ratan Bansode, Sudhir Bagul, Dr Korai, Dr Bhande, Dr Walmik Saravade, Sachit Tasgaonkar, Surendra Bansode, Prabhakar Dangle, Manohar Sonavne, Amrapali Tambe, Milind Lahane, Harsh Krishnatray, Chetan Shinde, Bodhare Brothers, Advocate Prahlad Khandare, Mahboob Badshah Wali Shaikh, Pramod Ranjan, Anil Varghese, Shrujana Niranjan Shridhar and Karunakar Akare.

As always, my family members' support has been invaluable, so I want to record my gratitude to my wife Jaimala Pawar and son Tejvil Pawar.

I hope that the activists and researchers who benefited from the Marathi edition of *Dalit Panthers* will find the English translation equally rewarding.

J.V. Pawar
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दलित पँथर

काही प्रमुख नेत्यांच्या स्वाक्षऱ्या तत्कालीन स्वाक्षऱ्या

(राजा ढाले)

(ज०वि० पवार)

(उमाकांत रणधीर)

(रामदास आठवले)

(अरुण कांबळे)

के. बी. गमरे (लंडन)

गंगाधर गाडे

नामदेव ढसाळ

अविनाश महातेकर

Signatures of the leaders of the Dalit Panther movement

The background

On 27 October 1954, at an informal meeting with some of Mumbai's senior activists at the Siddharth College, which was then located in the barracks along Marine Lines, Babasaheb Ambedkar shared his anguish over their squabbles. He urged them to put an end to their infighting, as it could undermine the work they had done for the oppressed people. Expressing concern over the plight of the downtrodden people who were at the mercy of such social activists, he was moved to tears. He rued that he had not been able to do much for the people of the rural areas. These sentiments shook those present at the meeting.

Some of them went on to become leaders but could not give up their old habits. After Dr Ambedkar's death, the movement disintegrated. These squabbling leaders fell prey to the crooked politics of the Congress party that led to further division in society.

Consequently, the orthodox, the rich and the powerful became even more ruthless towards the Dalits. The main victims of exploitation were people living in the rural areas, especially the Ambedkarites among them – those who were influenced by Babasaheb and had started asserting their rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Earlier, Dalits used to be subjected to exploitation and atrocities and in the villages, the orthodox people used to ostracize them. The lives of these ostracized Dalits in the closed societies of villages was miserable – for they were totally dependent on the rest of the village for their livelihood.

While Dalits from other communities had their traditional (caste) vocational skills to rely on, the Ambedkarites (former Ma-

hars) who had converted to Buddhism had no such vocation to ensure regular income. The restrictions imposed by the village used to ruin their lives. The responsibility of taking up their cause rested with leaders of the Republican Party of India (RPI), which was established after the death of Babasaheb. However, the leaders were busy fighting among themselves, oblivious to the fact that they were entrusted with the responsibility of taking the Ambedkarite movement forward. The victims in villages had given up hopes of being rescued from their condition by these leaders and had no strength left to stand up to and question the injustice, let alone fight it. For such victims, the Dalit Panther became a ray of hope. It rejuvenated them and boosted their confidence in taking on the system that was subjugating them.

Babasaheb used to describe a village as a garbage dump of casteism. His followers rejected casteism and its stipulated diktats. When violence broke out after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, it was mainly the Marathas from Maharashtra who targeted the Brahmins. Dalits stayed away from the violence because they had learnt that violence was not the tool to overcome ideological differences. The violence marginalized rural Brahmins, who were left fuming. The Brahmins nursed a grudge against Marathas although they did not show it or take revenge. However, despite being a minority community, the Brahmins continued to control the entire society on the basis of their intellectual prowess and "divinely" sanctioned supremacy in the caste system.

During the same period, the country had started experimenting with Panchayat committees for local governance in rural areas. Based on the recommendations of the Jivraj Mehta commission and Vasantrao Naik committee reports, developmental works were being undertaken in villages. Before the Panchayat system was introduced, the most powerful position in a village, of the "patil", used to be occupied by members of the Maratha community. It was a traditional position, not an administrative one, but carried supreme status in the traditional village community. The panchayat system ushered in an official position, that of the "sarpanch". Being an administrative post, it bestowed power and opportunities to get

one's hands on lucre. The traditional position of a "patil" and the democratic post of a "sarpanch" came to be vested in members of the Maratha community by virtue of their clout in the villages. The Maratha community became more powerful than ever, even within the framework of the constitution.

However, these first baby steps taken towards democratization of local governance led to rivalry and provided leeway for exposing the atrocities against Dalits. Such incidents drew the attention of newspapers, prompting reporters to visit the homes of victimized Dalits. The news reports of such incidents, however, ultimately resulted in more exploitation of the victims. Since the RPI leaders had politically compromised with the then ruling Congress party, the situation led to anguish among Dalits. Whenever newspapers reported such incidents, the leaders could do little to take up their cases. The state of affairs made Dalit youths like me feel the need for a militant organization to combat atrocities. Incidents of women being raped and paraded naked, Dalits being ostracized and human excreta being dumped in wells were on the rise, so were human sacrifices, lynchings, murders, people being burnt alive, burning of houses, grabbing of land and denial of land for cremating the dead. There was even a heinous incident of eyes being gouged out for demanding justice. It was like standing on the mouth of a volcano. We thus founded Dalit Panthers. That was our way of venting our anger simmering within us.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had wanted a strong opposition party to take shape for the sake of a healthy democracy in the country. He had envisaged such a role for the Republican Party of India to check the ruling party. He had wanted to unite all opposition parties to create a strong alternative to the Congress party. Unfortunately, this did not happen during his lifetime. However, over time, opposition parties gained importance and had their say. The prime minister in Parliament and the chief ministers in their respective state assemblies used to allow opposition parties to speak. Important decisions were not bulldozed through monstrous majority votes. This trend continued till 1971 when the Congress party got a monstrous majority of seats under the leadership of the late Indira Gandhi.

In 1969, Indira Gandhi nationalized banks, and the Indian economy changed tracks. After the war with Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh in 1971, her image received an unprecedented boost. She became the most powerful force in India and gained importance in international politics. In the mid-term poll of 1971, the Congress party under her leadership won 350 out of 518 seats in the Lok Sabha. Various factions of the Republican Party of India, which Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had wanted to become the strongest opposition party, had contested many seats but could win only Pandharpur, where N.S. Kamble was elected as the Congress-RPI nominee from the reserved constituency. Dadasaheb Gaikwad had forged the alliance between the Congress party and the Republican Party of India in 1967 for the zilla parishad (district committee) elections. This alliance remained even after he died on 15 December 1971 and Dadasaheb R.S. Gavai took over at the helm.

In Indian democracy, the upper house of the parliament, the Rajya Sabha, is considered as important as the lower house, the Lok Sabha. In 1971, the Congress party did not have a majority in the Rajya Sabha, which comprises 243 members and the magic figure is 122. The Congress had 116 members and six more were needed. However, buoyed by her success in 1971, Indira Gandhi started belittling Parliament. She became reckless, as there was nobody around to control her. The haughtiness percolated into the party across the nation. In Maharashtra, 42 out of the 45 MPs belonged to the Congress party. In the subsequent assembly polls held in 1972, the Congress party secured a clear majority in Gujarat (winning 139 out of 287), Mysore (now Karnataka, 161 out of 216), Andhra Pradesh (196 out of 287), Himachal Pradesh (48 out of 68) and Maharashtra (222 out of 270 seats).

There were 48 MPs in the Lok Sabha belonging to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) who could have restrained the ruling party leaders, but the Communist Party of India (CPI) leaders like S.A. Dange gradually started supporting the Congress party. Given this situation, the only thing that could rein in the arrogance of the Congress leaders was the press, for left-leaning scribes filled the ranks in the

newspapers. And it did. During 1971 and 1972, newspapers played a crucial role in checking the hurtling Congress, using the growing atrocities against Dalits as their shields. In 1971, atrocities against Dalits, which never used to be prominently displayed in newspapers, made front-page news.

Such stories had a lasting impact on Dalit youth. Every day, stories of atrocities against Dalits used to leave them shaken. Around the same time, the report of the Elayaperumal committee was made public. The committee had travelled across India to compile cases of atrocities against Dalits and prescribed remedies to curb them. L. Elayaperumal had headed the committee and Dadasaheb Gaikwad, one of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's closest lieutenants, had been a member.

Being an experienced person, Dadasaheb left a mark on the report. It was similar to the reports in the United States that revealed atrocities being committed against the African Americans. It revealed the high-handedness of the Congress party's goons, the *zamindars* (landlords), the rich and the powerful. The report led to outrage among Dalit youth – the second generation after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's death – and they wanted to fight back. This generation had followed his message of "Educate, Unite and Fight", but found itself in a quandary. Born into poor families, they were all bread-earners, mainly employed in government departments and couldn't risk losing their jobs by participating in the movement as activists. Some of them came up with the idea of uniting the older generation of Dalit leaders who were heading various factions of the Republican Party of India. A new organization, Republican Kranti Dal, was formed, with Dr Narayan Gaikwad as its president. The new outfit was headquartered on the 13th lane of Kamathipura area of Mumbai.

When Dr Gaikwad and his colleagues met me, I was a ward-level worker of the Republican Party of India and used to write in *Prabuddha Bharat*, the organization's mouthpiece. I had already written a novel, *Balidaan* (Sacrifice), which earned me some recognition. I told Dr Gaikwad that the coming-together of the older generation of Dalit leaders was not the remedy to curb atrocities.

However, he continued to send one of his associates Vasant More-Dhamankar to me to convince me to persuade the Dalit leadership to forget their differences and unite. It was a period of uneasiness among the youth. There were many youth organizations already in existence. One such organization was the socialist Yuvak Kranti Dal, in which Dr Kumar Saptarshi, Hussein Dalwai, Shama Pandit, Bhalchandra Mungekar, Ram Satpute, Hiralal Sonawane, Subhash Pawar and others were active. The Republican Kranti Dal was modelled on the Yuvak Kranti Dal.

Among other youth socialist organizations was the Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha. It was ideologically identical to the Yuvak Kranti Dal. Dr Ram Manohar Lohia had influenced the youth in both the organizations. The youths at the forefront of the *Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha* included Kamlakar Subhedar, Latif Khatik, Ganesh Torsekar and Krishna Brid. Both the organizations had adopted Dr Lohia's philosophy. At the same time, an apolitical Ambedkarite organization, Yuvak Aghadi, came into existence. It was based at the Siddharth Vihar students' hostel in Wadala, Mumbai. The prominent youths associated with it included Bhagwan Waghmare (Zarekar), Raja Dhale, D.G. Jadhav, Arjun Dangle, Chintaman Jawle, Hiraman Bodhare, Vinayak Ranjane, Madhar Dhivar, Sudhakar Hadwalkar and Vasant Kamble.

April is the month of festivity for Dalits because Dr Ambedkar was born on April 14. Dalit localities celebrate his birth anniversary with gusto and pride to express gratitude to their liberator. The festivities include processions, speeches, cultural shows and various collective activities that go on for a couple of months. Every year, Dalits look forward to the occasion. However, on 14 April 1972, an unpleasant incident in Mumbai dampened the spirit of Dalits.

While Dr Ambedkar's birth anniversary was being celebrated at the Dalit locality of Chinchwadi (Gadhav Bawdi) in Bandra, some of the elite residing in nearby buildings became annoyed with the loudspeaker blaring songs on Dr Ambedkar. They filed a complaint with the police. A team of police personnel from the Bandra police station arrived at the venue of the celebrations and started assaulting the Dalits, and they wouldn't stop even after the organ-

izers turned the sound down. The use of loudspeakers is common in all public religious functions in India, including those of Hindus and Muslims, but some Hindu police officials nursed a grudge against Ambedkarites and used to wait for an opportunity to show their might. The police team headed by PSI Nanavare not only assaulted Dalits, but also smashed photographs of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha. The news spread like wildfire in Mumbai city, drawing crowds to the Bandra Police Station to protest. Demonstrations were held at various places across Mumbai. Two of them were important. On 16 April 1972, Dr Ambedkar's son Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar led an army of protestors to the front of the state secretariat (known as *sachivalaya* then and *mantralaya* today). The protestors demanded an inquiry into the Bandra incident and suspension of the police officer concerned. Barrister B.D. Kamble and Bhausaheb Kelshikar led another protest march to the Bandra Police Station and demanded the suspension of the police official. Leaders of both the demonstrations submitted memoranda to senior police officials and minister of state D.T. Rupawate, who promised to take action. However, neither he nor anyone else took any action, adding to the anguish of Dalits.

The Republican Party of India had been divided into various factions. Barrister Rajabhau Khobragade, who was the vice-chairman of the Rajya Sabha – the upper house of parliament – and therefore wielded some clout, headed one of the factions. However, he was not re-elected in the election held on 1 April 1972. The candidates who were elected were M. R. Vyas (who secured 3900 votes), Sikandar Ali Bakht (3800), Sushila Desai (3700), Gulabrao Patil (3600), Vinaykumar Parashar (3400) and Republican Party of India (Gaikwad faction) candidate N.H. Kumbhare (3700). Khobragade suffered a miserable defeat, securing only 1,200 votes. The electorate comprised 256 legislators of the Maharashtra Assembly dominated by the Congress party. The Dalit leaders of various factions of the Republican Party of India were expecting the victory of both Kumbhare as well as Khobragade with the help of the Congress party's votes. The defeat of Khobragade made them jittery.

In 1972, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar was both the Mumbai region chief and the head of the parliamentary board of the Khobragade faction. The decision of finalizing the candidate rested with the parliamentary board, but an overconfident Khobragade had declared his own candidature. To maintain party discipline, no one protested against the decision, but later, on 19 April 1972, Bhaiyyasaheb resigned from the post of the chief of the parliamentary board of the Khobragade faction. Bhaiyyasaheb attributed Khobragade's defeat to the latter's overconfidence and unilaterally deciding to contest without taking others into confidence. The situation in the other factions of the Republican Party of India was similar, and that included the leaders' highhandedness. B.C. Kamble headed one such faction while Dadasaheb Gaikwad led another. All of these leaders ran their organizations like private entities, without following democratic norms. They were Dr Ambedkar's successors but they forgot that Dr Ambedkar had been a democrat at heart and had always criticized leaders who monopolized power, including Gandhiji.

The schism among his successors came to the fore when *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (from the group that published *The Times of India*) published an article by Dr Eleanor Zelliot in its issue dated 2 April 1972. The article, "Dr Ambedkar and his Mahar colleagues", was part of a series on various communities. One of the high-profile lieutenants of Dr Ambedkar was B. C. Kamble. He objected to the use of the word "Mahar" by Zelliot and organized burning of the copies of the weekly in protest. He stated that Mahars had converted to Buddhism and mentioning them by their caste was derogatory. He also threatened to file a defamation suit. Neither the Khobragade faction nor the Gaikwad faction of the Republican Party of India supported him.

On 7 April 1972, elections were held for the nine seats of the Maharashtra Legislative Council. There were 18 candidates in the fray and seven out of those elected were from the Congress party. One of the winners was a former RPI leader D.T. Rupawate. The RPI had a nominal presence in the 1952 elections, but after the 1957 elections, it became so powerful that it held the position of the leader of the opposition, on its own, without the support of other

parties. Rupawate's defection to the Congress invited the ire of Republican leaders. On 14 April 1972, a public meeting was organized at Dr Ambedkar's memorial, Chaityabhoomi, in Mumbai to celebrate his birth anniversary. Speaking on the occasion, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar said that though some people had failed to resist the temptation and deserted the Republican Party of India to join the Congress party, they would return sooner or later. Other speakers like Sumantrao Gaikwad and Prof Ramakant Yadav lambasted Rupawate for his betrayal. Sumantrao threatened to teach Rupawate a lesson if the latter spoke against the RPI leadership. Ironically, both Sumantrao and Yadav later became servile to the Congress party, revealing that they themselves were excellent opportunists.

One such opportunistic drama was enacted while electing two members for the Maharashtra Legislative Council from the then Bombay Municipal Corporation (now Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation). The Congress had nominated Linganna Pujari, while for the Shiv Sena, Manohar Joshi entered the fray. The results were shocking. The Congress had 59 members in the civic body and was expected to get the support of two Muslim League members and a Communist Party member. However, instead of securing 62 votes as expected, the Congress candidate could garner only 56 votes, revealing that there was cross-voting. The Shiv Sena's strength was 39, but Joshi secured 54 votes, 15 more than he would have if only his partymen had voted for him. Two RPI members were suspected to be among the 15 cross-voting members.

Such incidents had become common in Indian politics. The Congress party, which wanted to reach the figure of 122 in the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), had only 116 members. It left no stone unturned to get the support of six more members. Even while seeking support for V.V. Giri as the president of India, the Congress party under the leadership of Indira Gandhi ensured that he secured 49 votes in the Mysore Legislative Assembly, even when the strength of her party was 23.

On 14 April 1972, while Ambedkar Jayanti (birth anniversary) was observed at Chaityabhoomi, a ceremony was held to lay the foundation stone of a national memorial for Dr Ambedkar in his

native village, Ambadave, in Mandangad tehsil of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra. The Dhotre brothers, who hailed from Shigwan but had settled in Worli, Mumbai, took the initiative for the memorial and invited local Congress MLA R.L. Belose, along with Panchayat Samiti (Committee) chairperson Appasaheb Gosavi. Belose laid the foundation stone but the project failed to draw the state government's attention until 1977.

On 22 April 1972, Indira Gandhi asked the entire country to prepare for a grand celebration of the silver jubilee of independence from British rule. The celebration on 15 August that year would include illumination of all government offices right from village panchayats to the parliament building. The prime minister asked the states to convene special sessions of legislative assemblies on the eve of the Independence Day and announced a special session of Parliament to celebrate the occasion. She also announced several programmes for improving housing, communications, health services and welfare measures for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes. Newspapers and magazines, such as the Pune-based *Sadhana*, brought out special issues on the occasion.

Meanwhile, elections to the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly were held on 9 March 1972, in which the Congress party emerged stronger. The RPI was trounced, with just two of its candidates – W.A. Deshmukh and V.N. Khandiwale – getting elected. Deshmukh was an efficient legislator, but Khandiwale turned out to be a tight-lipped MLA.

A special mention of the assembly elections held in 1972 is necessary because, after the elections, Sharad Pawar was inducted into the Cabinet of ministers and minister of state Pratibha Patil was promoted to a cabinet minister. Pawar became the minister of state for home and over time ensured the decline and obliteration of the Dalit movement. Ironically, Pawar always had the support of Dalits as he continued to rise in politics.

Meanwhile, before the Republican Kranti Dal was formed, Shiv Sena MLA Wamanrao Mahadik had called a meeting to cash in on the Bandra incident. Manohar Joshi presided over the meeting and those present included actress Vaijayantimala's husband Dr

Chamanlal Bali. The speakers at the meeting criticized the RPI leadership. This meeting influenced a group of Dalit youths that supported the Shiv Sena. Raghunath Bhalerao, who later worked in the Dalit movement as Kakasaheb Khambalkar, led this group. Another outfit, "Bhim Sena", was formed in Mumbai's Kamathipura area, where I used to live.

I had been active in the Republican movement since 1962 and was the RPI deputy secretary from my ward. In 1964, I was arrested when I led a unit of protestors to demand land for landless farmers. All those who had taken part in the *satyagraha* were detained in a secured open ground. I had a job and, as we were poor, could not let go of it. So, when the *Bhim Sena* was launched I was not at the forefront. Around a hundred youths had gathered for its first meeting in Padmashali community hall at Kamathipura. Prominent among those present were Shantaram Adhangale, Kamlesh Santoji Gaikwad, Narayan Gaikwad, Sitaram Misal, B.R. Kamble, Vishnu Gaikwad, Savlaram Kadam, G.B. Kadam, Shridhar Jadhav, Kedare, V.S. Asware, S.R. Jadhav and T.D. Yadav. Initially, they had agreed on the name "Bhim Sena" but, after further discussion, dropped it, for there was already a "Bhim Sena" in Hyderabad. Finally, they named it Republican Kranti Dal to teach the older generation of Dalit leaders a lesson.

Leaders of the *Republican Kranti Dal* started meeting veteran Dalit leaders with a view to forge unity among them. However, Dadasaheb Gaikwad was indisposed for long periods while B.C. Kamble used to stay away from the younger generation of leaders. There was uneasiness among the Dalit youth because Shiv Sena was growing and some of them were being drawn to it. There was a need to stop them from joining the Shiv Sena. So, Republican Kranti Dal was renamed "Republican Aikya Kranti Dal", with an emphasis on *aikya* or unity. Unfortunately, some leaders of the new organization started falling prey to allurements and gave up the cause. One such leader, V.S. Asware, who used to lambast veteran Dalit leaders, joined the Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar faction of RPI. Others like Sumantrao Gaikwad and R.G. Ruke followed him. The Congress party was treating Republican leaders as vassals and they

were happy in their servility.

The newspapers of the day used to carry stories of atrocities against Dalits. Writing in Pune Students' Committee's periodical *Beyond Friendship* in 1972, Shankarrao Kharat, an eminent Dalit writer, called for a separate university for Dalits. It created ripples among literary, academic and political circles when newspapers from Mumbai and Pune took note of it. It was the time when another Dalit writer Baburao Bagul's collection of short stories *Maran Swast Hot Ahe* (Death is Becoming Cheaper) had received an award from the Maharashtra government. The novel *Mukti Sangram* (Battle for Liberation) by H. G. Bansode had created a stir among literary circles. Dalit literary works came to be compared with and debated alongside works of non-Dalit writers like Madhu Mangesh Karnik's *Mahimchi Khadi* (Mahim Creek) and Jayawant Dalvi's *Chakra* (Wheel). Prof M.P. Rege organized a public debate in Kirti College, Mumbai, that featured authors from both sides. I participated in what turned out to be a heated debate, so did Prof Gangadhar Pantawane, Prof Keshav Meshram, Raja Rajwade, Narayan Surve, Dr Sada Karhade and W.V. Bhat. Bagul was our literary leader.

Eventually, Dalit writers started meeting in Dadar for discussions. We used to sit at one of the two Iranian restaurants in Dadar and discuss for hours together. Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal and Prahlad Chendwankar used to be there. I used to join them after my office hours.

It was the period of high-handedness of Indira Gandhi, hooliganism of Congress members and a surge in atrocities against Dalits. There were organizations like Yuvak Kranti Dal, Republican Kranti Dal, Yuvak Aghadi, Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha and Muslim Satyashodhak Samiti. The Dalit Panther was launched against this backdrop.

Formation of the Dalit Panther

On 10 April 1970, the Elayaperumal Committee's report shook Parliament with its shocking information on atrocities committed against Dalits in the country. L. Elayaperumal was an MP who had been appointed as the head of the committee in 1965 to study cases of atrocities against Dalits across the country and suggest measures to curb them. The committee submitted the report to the government on 30 January 1970, but the government did not have the nerve to table it in Parliament straight away. The report revealed the total failure of Indira Gandhi's government to provide justice to Dalits. Finally, the government had to give in to the persistent demands of the opposition parties. The perpetrators of atrocities were mainly Congressmen, Brahmins and some non-Brahmins.

The Elayaperumal Committee reported around 11,000 cases of atrocities nationwide against Dalits, including 1,177 murders, in a single year. Dalits women were being raped, stripped and paraded. Dalit men and women were assaulted for using a public water source, whipped for wearing good clothes, beaten up for wearing slippers. Labourers were intimidated and human excreta thrown into water sources used by Dalits.

The report had ignited the minds of Dalit youths yearning for a change on the ground. Veteran Dalit leaders scattered among various factions of the Republican Party of India were unmoved, but young writers and poets wanted the government to take action. I used to wait for Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal and Prahlad Chendwankar at the Iranian restaurant in Dadar, which was our meeting point. One day, while discussing the issue, we unani-

mously agreed to issue a public statement warning the government. We planned to obtain signatures of 12 Dalit writers. However, Baburao Bagul refused to sign.

Daya Pawar was a government employee (in the railways) and was bound by the employment code. Prahlad Chendwankar was a loose cannon and not reliable. Ultimately, Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Bhimrao Shirwale, Umakant Randhir, Gangadhar Pantawne, Waman Nimbalkar, Moreshwar Vahane and I were the Dalit writers who signed the public statement. What deterred Baburao Bagul and Daya Pawar from signing it was this sentence: "If the government fails to curb injustice and atrocities on Dalits, we will take the law into our own hands." There was no mention of violence or declaring a war. The police personnel would have read the statement and, seeing that it had come from writers, trashed it. Yet, when Baburao Bagul and Daya Pawar refused to sign it, my respect for them declined.

Two atrocities in Maharashtra sparked outrage among the Dalit youth in 1972. One had taken place in Bawda village, in Pune district, where the entire village had ostracized Dalits. Shahajirao Patil, whose brother Shankarrao Patil was a minister of state, had given the call for isolating Dalits. This led to a demand for Shankarrao to own moral responsibility and resign. While the incident was still fresh in the minds of people, two Dalit women were stripped and paraded naked at Brahmangaon village in Parbhani district of Maharashtra. Their offence was that they were going to a well belonging to an upper-caste Sopan Dajiba to quench their thirst. Before they could even have a sip, the casteist villagers spotted them and used thorny branches of Babool trees to hit their naked bodies.

Several organizations condemned the incident. A meeting was held at Worli, Mumbai. Baburao Bagul, who presided over the meeting, gave a clarion call to the Dalit youth to rise and fight against such atrocities. However, he also said that he would not actively be part of these struggles or sign any memorandum. Youths carrying torches marched to the Chembur police station on May 27. V.M. Kadam, Ratan Salve, Prof Yadavrao Gangurde and D.S. Rajguru led the march. They submitted a memorandum to the chief

inspector Suresh Mathure. An organization called Yuvak Kranti Dal staged a dharna (sit-in) opposite the state secretariat, Sachivalaya. In all, 25 youths, including Husain Dalwai, Subhash Pawar, Hiralal Sonawane and Bhalchandra Mungekar, participated in it. The agitators blamed the Congress party for the rise in atrocities against Dalits.

The leaders of Yuvak Aghadi met Chief Minister Vasantrao Naik on May 28 and submitted a memorandum. Despite being considered a progressive state in India, they wrote, under his leadership, Maharashtra was witnessing a rise in atrocities against Buddhists in several places like Sultanpur, Belgaon, Longaon, Bawda and Brahmangaon. They demanded that the chief minister institute a judicial inquiry to punish the culprits and create special government machinery to curb such incidents and protect minorities. The signatories were Raja Dhale, Chintaman Jawale, Vasant Kamble, Bhagwan Zarekar and Vinayak Ranjane. Others who were listed in the memorandum (but didn't sign) were Madhav Dhiwar, Sudhakar Halwalkar and Arjun Dangle. The chief minister suggested that Yuvak Aghadi send its representatives to the affected villages, get first-hand information and submit a report to him. He said judicial inquiries weren't always successful in revealing the truth, but that he would conduct a judicial inquiry and compare the two reports, before taking action against the culprits. I was not a member of the Yuvak Aghadi but I had still accompanied the team on this visit to the chief minister's bungalow. Later in the day, a meeting was held at the Siddharth Vihar hostel in Wadala.

Bhagwan Zarekar and Raja Dhale were students residing in Siddharth Vihar hostel. Namdeo Dhasal and I, who were outsiders, rejected chief minister's suggestion that we meet the victims of atrocities and file a report. We pointed out that the government had the machinery and intelligence network for the purpose. We said that investigating incidents and reporting the findings to the government was not our job. Both of us walked out of the meeting. Dhasal and I lived in the same area. Dhasal used to stay on Jairaj Bhai Lane, although only municipal records had that address. It was popularly known as Dhor Chawl because of the kababs pre-

pared and sold there. It was also known as Nabab Chawl. Apart from the postmen, few knew the real name of the lane. "Dhor" means "cattle" and it was used to describe a particular caste. It was very demeaning. Near Dhasal's locality, I used to live on Kamathipura's First Lane, in quarters allotted to municipal employees engaged in sanitation work. It was known as Siddharth Nagar. Dhasal and I used to meet almost every day. By default, I used to be the first audience for the poems that he wrote. Even after meeting me at my home in the morning, he used to visit my office. *Chapattis* from my home and *dal* from the Aap Ki Dukaan restaurant at Kemp's Corner were what we had for lunch. This routine continued till my office was shifted to Charni Road.

One day, while returning from Siddharth Vihar, we thought of launching an underground movement to put those committing atrocities against Dalits in their place. We wanted to visit the victims promptly and deal with the perpetrators of the crime. However, there was a hitch. Our society would not patronize such a movement and it would boomerang on us. Besides, we were getting used to being in the limelight. After much debate, we gave up the idea.

A lull followed. As such, I usually fell ill during the summer months of April and May. From the ninth grade, when I started attended an evening high school, "earning and learning" had gone on simultaneously in my life. That April, too, I fell ill due to typhoid and was ordered compulsory rest. I spent the time reading newspapers. I had joined Bank of India in February 1972 after resigning from Mumbai Telephones. This had become possible after Indira Gandhi nationalized banks in 1969. I was also studying for my MA but had to skip the examination due to ill health and my preoccupation with the Dalit movement. Finally, instead of completing my post-graduation in arts and launching into a career in the academia, I opted for the Ambedkarite movement and quit education.

On 29 May 1972, I resumed work. Dhasal dropped by my house. I had just recovered from typhoid and was feeling weak. We walked towards Opera House along Vitthalbhai Patel Road via

Alankar Cinema, where we drank mosambi juice. As we were walking, we were discussing the possibility of launching a militant organization to combat atrocities against Dalits. We thought of various names for the organization, but ultimately we zeroed in on "Dalit Panther". Hence, the birth of the "Dalit Panthers" took place as we were walking along a Mumbai street. It lived up to its name by taking to the streets for the cause. Having decided to form the organization, the next step was to make it public. Dhasal was well acquainted with people in the socialist movement, which had an office of its workers' wing on Raja Ram Mohan Roy Road, close to my office. We met Ramesh Samarth, who used to work as a typist in that office. I knew Ramesh, because he was a poet and I had read his volume of poetry titled *Lakhlakhtya Bhakri* (Dazzling Bread). He typed out a press release announcing the formation of the Dalit Panther. Dhasal signed it first and then I did. Dhasal distributed copies of the press release to various newspapers and magazines. *Nava Kaal, Nav Shakti, Sandhyakaal* and *Maratha* published it. It did not get prominent space in the dailies, as they and the police thought of it as just another frivolous organization.

An individual or an organization cannot stand on its own. It needs to stand on a strong foundation and on the shoulders of giants. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was standing on the shoulders of the Buddha and Krantiba Jotiba Phule. After Babasaheb's death, the Ambedkarite movement stood on the foundation that he built. We had inherited his legacy from the older generation of Ambedkarites and wanted to do something different. After the creation of the Dalit Panther, we planned to organize a rally.

I issued a statement which read: "Caste prejudice has gone berserk in Maharashtra, where rich farmers, those in power and their upper-caste goons are indulging in heinous crimes. To take on such inhuman casteist elements, the rebel youth from Mumbai have formed a new organization, the Dalit Panther. J.V. Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Vijay Girkar, Prahlad Chendwankar, Ramdas Sorte, Maruti Sorte, Kondiram Thorat, Uttam Kharat and Arjun Kasbe have been holding organizational meetings across Mumbai. These meetings have evoked an overwhelming re-

sponse."

Those involved in doing the groundwork for the organization mainly comprised residents of the Dhor Chawl neighbourhood where Dhasal lived, apart from budding writers. All of them except Dhasal had salaried jobs. I used to devote time only after office hours, starting around 7pm. I used to go to Dhor Chawl, where youths would be waiting for me. I used to select a few of them to accompany me to other localities like Chandanwadi and Palton Road. I couldn't take all of them with me because this required travelling by bus and I had to buy the tickets. I had to make the optimum use of money at my disposal to get the maximum impact. Dhasal used to accompany me every day, while Prahlad used to come only on Sunday mornings. Arjun Dangle, who did not attend our rally held on 9 July 1972, never accompanied us to meet the people either. We needed to create a base for the organization. Over the years many people have claimed that they were the founders of Dalit Panther, but the truth is Namdeo Dhasal and I founded the organization, to which several activists and the editor of Marathi daily *Nava Kaal*, Neelubhau Khadilkar, are witness.

We spread the word about the proposed rally mainly in residential areas between Saat Rasta and Palton Road, in localities inhabited by people from Konkan, Pune and Ahmednagar regions. The reason was that we already knew the people from these areas. We used to beat a metal box or plate as the criers do to draw the attention of the people. The speaker would stand on a stool if he got his hands on one, and start his speech on the plight of Dalits. Since we did not have a megaphone or microphones and loudspeakers, we had to talk loudly for hours every day. Dhasal and I would suffer sore throats. The local residents known to us would pass on our message to other people, too.

Monsoon had set in, and once when we sought shelter from the rain in Arjun Kasbe's home, Ramdas Sorte's father called me. He was known as Sorte Buwa and used to work for the Lal Nishan party, which was active in the labour movement. He agreed to lend me the megaphone that belonged to his organization. The megaphone was lying unused, for there were no "gate meetings" due to

the rains. To pick up the megaphone, we had to go to the office of the Lal Nishan party, near YMCA, in Mumbai Central area, and meet the party's ideologue Shripad Krishna Limaye. When we met him I told him how the Varna struggle (caste struggle) was more important than the class struggle. The discussion made Sorte Buwa fidgety because I was criticizing the Lal Nishan party. Limaye could have sent me back empty-handed but he was generous. He admitted that those involved in class struggle had made some mistakes, obviously referring to communist leaders like S.A. Dange. He sympathized with my situation and handed over the megaphone on the condition that I would protect it from the rain.

From then on, we started using the megaphone, with one activist holding an umbrella over it whenever it rained. I used to read out from the Elayaperumal Committee report statistics on atrocities against Dalits. Whenever I narrated details of atrocities, the audience would become charged with emotions and pledge support to fight back. One such incident had taken place in Kilavenmani, where the entire settlement of Dalits was set on fire. When some elderly residents tried to escape, they were dumped in the fire. Infants were stabbed in their stomachs with spears and killed. Describing about these shocking incidents used to evoke prompt and unanimous response from the audience.

Dhasal used to lace his narration with some local rustic proverbs prevalent in the Manchar-Ahmednagar region. Sometimes, the megaphone used to get wet, despite the use of an umbrella. When Sorte Buwa came to know about it, he asked his son Ramdas to lend his raincoat. He was reluctant to lend his raincoat and only did so on the condition that I would be the only one using it. Ramdas used to work in the Kalyan-Dombivli region and was never back home before 7pm. We used to wait for him to return from work and have his dinner. By the time we started our work it used to be past 8pm. None of us had a raincoat, so we had to agree to the conditions Ramdas imposed. Ramdas' attitude used to anger Dhasal and once led to a brawl between him and Ramdas on Jivrajbhai Lane opposite Rusi Surti factory. It culminated in Ramdas slapping Dhasal. If I hadn't intervened then, we would have lost

the megaphone.

The statement that I issued for the July 9 rally listed the names of three writers – Arjun Dangle, Prahlad Chendwankar and Arjun Kasbe. When I was a student of MA (Marathi), I used to share a bench in the lecture hall with Anil Shantaram Thatte, Paren Shivram Jambhale and Arjun Dangle. Dangle and I became writers and part of the Dalit movement. Shantaram joined the All India Radio and was content doing a programme on the youth, while Jambhale became a teacher in the Robert Mani High School. Later, Jambhale joined the Marathi newspaper *Nav Shakti* and spent his entire career there. Kasbe, whose name I had mentioned in the statement issued for the rally, was my colleague and guide in literary affairs. He had written a long introduction to my novella *Balidaan* (sacrifice) in 1969. Chendwankar was a budding writer who used to meet me every Sunday. He had accompanied me to the literary conference held in Mahad, where Prof W.L. Kulkarni released *Balidaan*. Baburao Bagul presided over the programme that was organized by Ghanshyam Talwatkar and his Maharashtra Bouddha Sahitya Sabha. Daya Pawar was the secretary of the Sabha.

There were several important developments between 29 May 1972 and 9 July 1972. One of them was Yuvak Aghadi members' visit to Bawda following on from that meeting on 9 June with the chief minister and his suggestion. The chief of Yuvak Aghadi, Bhagwan Zarekar, had issued a public statement clarifying that the Yuvak Aghadi was a students' organization and was not affiliated to any political party and its main objective was to expose injustice and seek justice for the victims. Though the visit was scheduled for 9 June, the team arrived in the village only on 11 June. The 24-member team also included members from Yuvak Kranti Dal and Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha. At Bawda, they met minister of state Shankarrao Patil and demanded his resignation.

After the visit, the team held a press conference at Azad Maidan, Mumbai, on 13 June 1972 to share its findings. (The Yuvak Aghadi was based in the Siddharth Vihar hostel where Zarekar, Raja Dhale, K.T. Tutare and others used to live. However, the invitation that Zarekar circulated to the press mentioned the ad-

dress of the organization as "407/23 Municipal Chawl, Katrak Road, Wadala, Mumbai 31".)

In the press conference, the team announced that the Buddhists of Bawda village had been ostracized and the situation continued to remain tense. They said that Shankarrao was not only misleading the government, but was also the inspiration for the ostracism. There was a reign of terror in the village, with nobody willing to say a word against Shahaji Patil. A manifestation of the terror unleashed by the Patil family was the attack on Arun Doshi by the minister's brother Arun Patil. Doshi's wife told the team that he was too scared to lodge a police complaint.

On 29 May 1972, at a Buddha Jayanti celebration in Pune, a public demand for the resignation of minister Shankarrao Patil was made. Mayor Bhausaheb Chavan presided over the programme. Likewise, a march was taken out in Dhule on 31 May 1972 to protest against the atrocities committed in Bawda, Longaon, Himale and Brahmangaon. Prof J.G. Khairnar, who led the march, demanded the resignation of the Naik government. The demonstrators carried an 11-feet-tall effigy symbolizing casteism and burnt it. Similarly, five MLAs from Pune district and Dattatraya Govind Walse-Patil, former MLA from Ambegaon, demanded that the central government, instead of the state police, conduct the investigation.

Meanwhile, delegations from different organizations submitted memoranda to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 4 June 1972. Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar led one of the delegations. Barrister B.C. Kamble and Bhausaheb Kelshikar led Dhamma Seva Sangh's march with around 10,000 protestors from Azad Maidan to the residence of the chief minister. The march was stopped at Girgaum Chowpatty.

On the other side, the high-power committee appointed to investigate the Bawda case had a taste of how deeply entrenched caste prejudices were in the Indian psyche. When Justice R.R. Bhole from the Bombay High Court visited Bawda along with union minister of state for planning Mohan Dharia and met minister of state Shankarrao Patil in Boudhhawada on 6 June 1972, they

were not served tea, though arrangements for it were made in advance. When the caterer was questioned, he gave the excuse of not having a delivery man. The reason was the meeting was held in the area where Buddhists lived and the tea was to be served not only to the VIPs, but also to the Dalits. Serving tea to them would have "polluted" the cups, and the caterer would have been boycotted. Some journalists brought this incident to light but the administration and the police took no action against the tea supplier. In the meeting held at Bawda, Mohan Dharia criticized the state government for ignoring the seriousness of the ostracism of Dalits. He also demanded that the ruffians who were trying to pressurize witnesses be arrested. Justice R.R. Bhole expressed concern over the atrocities being committed in the native village of a minister who had taken the oath to adhere to the Constitution.

Shankarrao Patil apologized, and in Mumbai, the chief minister told journalists that those involved in the Bawda incident would not be spared even if they held high positions. He even declared that Shahaji Patil had been arrested. The same day, Vasantrao Chavan, the chairman of the Manmad-based All India Safai Mazdoor Sangh (All India Sanitary Workers' Union), warned the government that if the guilty were not punished before 5 August, the union would launch a statewide agitation. Later, on 6 June 1972, Baburao Repote led a demonstration on the issue. The same day, a community traditionally involved in the making and selling of leather goods held a conference to save their business from the advent of plastic goods, thereby prioritizing livelihood over self-respect and human rights. R.A. Khaire, an MLA, and Satyadev Shinde met finance minister Madhukarrao Chaudhary urging him to save their traditional business.

A few days later, on 10 June 1972, the RPI and the Socialist Party jointly held a demonstration in Pune. While addressing the protestors, senior socialist leader S.M. Joshi said that if the judiciary played truant in delivering justice, "we'll turn up at the gates of the court". If justice was not delivered to Dalits, he said, the judiciary would collapse. Another veteran socialist leader N.G. Gore said that such atrocities would embarrass the country, while Baba

Adhav suggested that the perpetrators of such crimes be made to sit on a donkey and paraded. Another speaker, Bhausaheb Chavan, questioned the silence of Bharatiya Jan Sangh, a right-wing organization.

12 June 1972: This was an extraordinary day for Maharashtra. It saw five protest marches, and while the state legislature was in session, two RPI members, Bhaskar Gawle and Narayan More, threw fireballs in the House from the visitors' gallery. The five protest marches were taken out by the Mumbai Region Congress Committee, the Republican Party of India (Kamble faction), the Republican Party of India (Gaikwad faction), the Girni Kamgar Sangh representing mill workers, and the Maharashtra Machhimar Parishad representing fishermen. All the protestors demanded an end to atrocities against Dalits.

The Congress party workers had taken to the streets under the leadership of Rajani Patel but when he climbed onto a vehicle to address the gathering, some RPI activists stopped him saying that until minister of state Shankarrao Patil resigned, they would lay siege to the legislative assembly building, preventing MLAs from getting out. The millworkers' group led by communist leader L.S. Karkhanis and the fishermen's group led by Bhai Bandarkar expressed solidarity with the RPI activists. Some Congress workers like Vilas Sawant climbed onto the vehicle on which Patel was ready to speak. Sawant wanted Patel to deliver his speech. It led to a brawl, Congress versus the rest, with stone-pelting and fisticuffs, making protestors run helter-skelter. The police resorted to *lathi charge* (hitting people with sticks) to control the situation.

While this was happening outside the legislature building, inside, Gawle and More had obtained entry passes from an MLA, F.M. Pinto. They threw fireballs made of rags doused with kerosene, shouting slogans hailing Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and condemning the state government. They also demanded the resignation of minister of state Shankarrao Patil. The arsonists were found guilty of transgressing the privileges of the legislators. The minister for industries, Narendra Tidke, moved a resolution to imprison Gawle and More till the legislature was in session. This res-

olution was carried by the House which had Sheshrao Wankhede as the speaker. Later, the Yuvak Kranti Dal demanded curtailment in the sentence but it was rejected. The two youths, who had thrown fireballs, were members of Republican Party from Ward No 19 and had also thrown leaflets demanding a separate country for Dalits – Dalitstan. The opposition parties moved an adjournment motion signed by R.K. Mhalgi (from Jana Sangh), G.M. Banatwala (Muslim League), P.N. Ghopte (Independent), W.A. Deshmukh (RPI) and D.B. Patil (Peasants' and Workers' Party). However, the ruling Congress party, which had a majority in the house, rejected it. The annoyed opposition leaders staged a walkout in protest.

Another incident took place on 14 June 1972. Jana Sangh leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee delivered a speech at Sundarbai Hall, Mumbai, in the presence of Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar. Vajpayee was heading a right-wing organization that was dominated by Brahmins, the traditional perpetrators of caste-based atrocities. It was difficult for him to speak against any caste as it would have meant speaking against his religion, which had given divine sanction for castes. For him, it was convenient to take a political stand and blame the ruling Congress party, and he did just that. He announced that the following day, on June 15, he would observe a 24-hour hunger strike at the Martyrs' Memorial. Bhaiyyasaheb did not utter a word of displeasure. Instead, he sought cooperation from Vajpayee in combating atrocities against Dalits.

Vajpayee went ahead with his hunger strike and when it concluded on June 16, many influential people went up to him and expressed solidarity, making it a multi-party protest. Those who visited him included Bal Thackeray, Mrinal Gore, D.B. Patil, Mayor Ganatra, R.S. Gavai and Sudhir Phadke. In his witty style, Thackeray described Bawda as "Bewda" (slang for an alcoholic) and suggested that a committee be formed to visit such villages. He pledged support from his followers in the struggle against atrocities. While Vajpayee suggested that a vigilance committee, which would include members from the communist as well as the Congress parties, be formed, Mrinal Gore demanded that Shahaji Patil be booked for committing an atrocity against Dalits, under a special

legal provision, instead of the Indian Penal Code. On June 15, while replying to a discussion in the legislature that involved several speakers, including Mhalgi, Bhegde, Natu, Wankhede, Padvi, Pinto and Ekmath Salve, the chief minister Vasantrao Naik admitted that his government had failed in curbing atrocities against Buddhists.

First rally: 9 July 1972

On Sunday, 9 July 1972, a conference on curbing caste atrocities and injustice was held at Chhabildas High School, Dadar. Inaugurated by barrister B.D. Kamble, the conference was held in the morning. I attended it, as the Dalit Panther rally was scheduled for the evening. I met Raja Dhale, who was then with the Yuvak Aghadi, at the meeting and insisted that he attend the Dalit Panther rally to be held at Siddharth Nagar. He agreed and accompanied me for the rally. A large number of youths from Mumbai and its suburbs turned out for the rally. The atmosphere was charged with anger against the rising atrocities against Dalits. I moderated the meeting and Arjun Kasbe presided over it. While I explained the situation, why the Dalit Panther was founded and answered queries from the audience, several speakers vented their ire against the government as well as the veteran RPI leaders. An RPI activist, B.S. Sasane, lambasted the government for not implementing the provisions enshrined in the Constitution and referred to Dr Ambedkar's statement that if the Constitution failed to meet expectations he would be the first person to burn it down. Sasane's comment provoked Hiraman Sangare, who was an activist associated with Congressman B.D. Zute. Sangare had misunderstood it and condemned Sasane's betrayal of Dr Ambedkar for saying that he would burn the Constitution. Sangare then criticized all established political parties like the Congress, the Jana Sangh, the Communist Party of India, the Republican Party of India and their leaders for betraying Dr Ambedkar's vision of a welfare state. I knew Sasane very well and understood his anger against the existing polity, including

RPI leaders. So, Sasane and I were both equally shocked when Sangare accused Sasane of betraying the Dalit cause by threatening to burn the Constitution drafted by Dr Ambedkar. On behalf of Sasane, I told the gathering that Sasane had only referred to Dr Ambedkar's statement and was not threatening to do anything. Kasbe, too, tried to clear the air and snubbed Sangare, who later became popular as Bhai Sangare.

Sangare was a good orator and had the ability to win over a crowd. It was the period of Shiv Sena dominance in the localities of the island city of Mumbai where the textile mills were the main source of livelihood. In areas like Lalbaug and Parel, the Sena enjoyed overwhelming support among the working class, mainly employed in textile mills. However, a member of the Sena, Bandu Shingre, had rebelled and quit the party. Some Sena activists used to attend our rallies to listen to Bhai Sangare, mistaking him for Bandu Shingre. However, even after realizing that this was a different "Bhai", they used to wait to listen to his speeches and applaud him. Bhai did not nurse any grudge against me for pointing out publicly that he had erred while reacting to Sasane's comment on Ambedkar and the Constitution. He used to hang around and show eagerness to work for the cause. I would supply him with references and background material and he would use them effectively in his speeches. We started meeting daily. On days he was unable to come to me, I used to go to the Saat Rasta area to meet him. When I used to visit Saat Rasta, youths from the locality would gather and we would hold an impromptu meeting. The youths hailing from different regions of Maharashtra – like the Kadam brothers from Konkan and the Phulpagar brothers from the hinterland – had no qualms over meeting me, as my approach was never xenophobic. Eventually, the Saat Rasta locality became a bastion of the Dalit Panther.

At the rally in Siddharth Nagar, Namdeo Dhasal's speech was a roaring success. He launched a scathing attack on the terror unleashed by the goons of the Congress party and the Shiv Sena. After all the speeches had been delivered, I requested that an action plan be announced. Some suggested ways to teach the veteran RPI lead-

ers a lesson and snap off their ties with the Congress party. Raja Dhale suggested that the Independence Day on 15 August be observed as "Black Independence Day". The suggestion was unanimously accepted as it was not going to be just another Independence Day. Rather, the day was going to mark the silver jubilee of India's independence. The government was planning grand celebrations. The then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, had announced that on the eve of the silver jubilee of Indian independence, a special session would be convened in the central hall of Parliament. She had also asked all the state governments to convene special sessions of their legislatures that day. Besides, all government offices, right from the village panchayat to the state headquarters, were to be illuminated. On 23 April 1972, all newspapers highlighted her announcement, in which she also talked about the necessity of declaring new welfare programmes in the areas of public health, housing and communication and for the upliftment of the backward classes.

The announcement had prompted several organizations to use the occasion to highlight their demands. Even the "Police Mitra Mandal" – an entity working for the welfare of police personnel – decided to take advantage of the mood in the run-up to the 25th Independence Day. Sambha Chavan, who headed the mandal (board), declared that the Independence Day would be observed as "the police demands day" if the government failed to meet the demands by August 14. On 7 June 1963, wives of Mumbai police constables had marched to the state legislature. Moreover, a "police demands day" was observed on 7 June 1972 at a public meeting that socialist leader Mrinal Gore and communist leaders G.L. Reddy and P.R. Kurne attended.

As part of observing the Black Independence Day, instructions were given to hoist black flags and sport black ribbons. It was also decided that on August 14, members of youth organizations would march to the state secretariat to protest against the failure of the government to protect Dalits.

That day, 9 July 1972, when the first rally of Dalit Panther was held, was not when the organization was founded, but some leaders

like Namdeo Dhasal began celebrating it as the foundation day. What was really objectionable was that Dhasal, who had lambasted the Congress party and the Shiv Sena in the first rally, started inviting leaders from these parties to speak on the occasion. Another leader, T.M. Kamble, who was not even present in the first rally, started celebrating his birthday and Dalit Panther's "foundation day" on July 9 to gain recognition from Jana Sangh and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Nevertheless, the awareness campaign for the Black Independence Day started with Dhasal undertaking the maximum visits to Dalit settlements.

Meanwhile, students of Somaiya College were up in arms against the order of the management prescribing uniforms for students after a row over girls attending college in short skirts. The diktat that college students should wear uniforms had led to protests in various colleges. Another issue that had annoyed students was the demand for capitation fees by colleges. It was an issue listed on the agenda of the Dalit Panther. Eventually, a committee to spearhead the agitation of students was formed. It comprised a dozen organizations, including the Dalit Panther, Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha, Yuvak Kranti Dal, Students' Federation of India and Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal. The Dalit Panther wanted the support of all progressive organizations and had decided to be part of the committee.

On the night of August 14, youths belonging to the organizations represented in the committee started gathering at Azad Maidan. Around 10pm, Dhasal arrived, but he had not bought the black cloth for making ribbons. All the shops in South Mumbai had closed down for the day. I went home and fetched an umbrella and a pair of scissors. While the headquarters of the Municipal Corporation and central railway were illuminated to celebrate the 25th Independence Day and people were loitering around, admiring it, we were busy cutting the black cloth of the umbrella to make ribbons to protest. After cutting the ribbons, we realized that we did not have pins, so we started making holes in the ribbons to hang them from our shirt buttons.

The march to the state headquarters was ready with youths dis-

playing banners of their organizations. The largest group stood behind the Dalit Panther banner. We embarked on our march from Azad Maidan to Vidhan Bhavan (legislature building), opposite Sachivalaya (state secretariat), at the stroke of midnight. When we reached Vidhan Bhavan, the legislature session had already begun. We started a parallel legislature featuring speeches by several speakers from among the youths that I had enrolled. I was the speaker of this mock legislature. We condemned the state government for its failure to curb atrocities against Dalits. We moved a resolution to this effect and unanimously passed it. Bhau Torsekar composed and recited impromptu his short poems, and received applause for their humour and defiance of the system. While our mock legislature was in session on the street, socialist legislator Mrinal Gore arrived. She delivered a speech at our gathering after registering her protest in the state legislature. I proposed a vote of thanks to conclude our mock legislature session. Its members included Kamlakar Subhedar, Latif Khatik, Ganesh Torsekar, Hussein Dalwai (who went on to become a member of the state legislature and later, a member of parliament), Shama Pandit, Bhalchandra Mungekar (who later became an MP), Gopal Dukhande, Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal. Bhau Torsekar wrote a detailed report in his column "Yuvak Jagat" (Youth World) in the *Maratha*.

Explosive words in *Saadhanaa*

A well-respected weekly published from Pune, *Saadhanaa*, planned a special issue on the occasion of the 25th Independence Day. The theme of the special issue was "Freedom of Dalits". Socialist leaders like S.M. Joshi and Yadunath Thatte, who had always taken a high moral ground on all issues, were part of the management of the weekly. Anil Avchat, the executive editor, visited the Siddharth Vihar hostel in Wadala and requested us to write for the special issue. We agreed. However, since Namdeo Dhasal and I were busy organizing the protest for the Independence Day, we could not contribute. Five important writers – Moreshwar Vahane (whose surname was wrongly spelt in the weekly as Rahane), Daya Pawar, Prahlad Chendwankar, Jagdish Karajgaonkar (alias Arjun Dangle) and Raja Dhale – among us wrote for *Saadhanaa*. Surprisingly, the special issue on Dalits did not mention the Dalit Panther. Neither the writers nor the executive editor acknowledged the organization. Among them, Arjun Dangle and Prahlad Chendwankar later started masquerading as the founders of the Dalit Panther.

An article written by Raja Dhale in this special issue became controversial. Some Congress party leaders had been accusing Dalits of insulting the national flag. Nothing could be farther from the truth: The Ashok Chakra had been incorporated in the national flag and on 14 October 1956, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. There was no question of Dalits showing disrespect to the national flag. On the contrary, non-Dalits had been insulting the national flag and the issue was taken up in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) on 31 May 1972. M.P. Verma raised the issue of cinemagoers insulting the national flag and anthem in theatres. Nandini Satpati,

the union minister for information and broadcasting, said that every member of the audience had to stand up and show respect to the national flag and the national anthem when the latter was played after the screening of a film in theatres. She added that any person showing disrespect to the national flag and national anthem would be punished. S.G. Pradhan, the police commissioner of Mumbai, issued a public warning that anyone caught showing disrespect to the national flag would be arrested under Section 2 of the Flag Code. The punishment for showing disrespect to the national flag was more severe than that for sexually assaulting a Dalit woman.

Raja Dhale's intention of writing that "controversial" article was to show this discrepancy between the punishments meted out to those disrespecting the national flag and to the perpetrators of atrocities against Dalit women. He wrote: "A Brahmin woman is not disrobed in Brahmangaon, but a Buddhist woman is. And what is the punishment for it? Imprisonment for one month or a fine of Rs 50! If a person does not stand up to show respect towards the national flag, the fine is Rs 300. The national flag is just a piece of cloth, a symbol in specific colours, yet disrespect towards it invites a heavy fine. But if a woman in flesh and blood worth her value in gold is disrobed, the fine is just Rs 50. What is the use of such a national flag? Is it to be shoved in the arse? A nation comes into being due to its people. Is the grief of showing disrespect to a symbol more than that of showing disrespect to people? What is more? The value of our dignity is not more than the price of a *saree*. Hence, such offence should invite a severe punishment. Or else, how will patriotism thrive?"

By the time our mock legislature concluded on August 14, it was past midnight and there was no public transport – neither bus nor rail services – to take us back home. So, as we were whiling away our time, waiting for dawn, when one of us suggested that we should go to Charni Road, where Acharya Rajneesh used to deliver late-night discourses on attaining *samadhi* through sexual intercourse. These discourses used to continue throughout the night. The suggestion piqued the interest of the gathering of youths, who were curious about attaining the Hindu concept of *samadhi* through sex. We

all walked from Kala Ghoda to Charni Road, but by the time we reached Chowpatty, the discourse had concluded. While we were walking, I told Raja Dhale that he would be booked for his incendiary article.

I was a subscriber of *Saadhanaa* magazine because of my acquaintance with Anil Thatte. The magazine used to publish my letters intermittently. I had received the special issue of *Saadhanaa* at my home on April 14 itself and the first thing I did was to read Dhale's article. I was convinced with his argument comparing disrespect to the national flag with an atrocity against a Dalit woman. But I was aware that the elite in society would not tolerate it.

Since Acharya Rajneesh's discourse had ended, there was no point in waiting at Charni Road. Raja Dhale suggested going to my home to pick up the copy of *Saadhanaa*. He wanted to read it. Many of the other youths also wanted to join us. "All of us can go to your home for tea," they said. I agreed and all of us walked to Siddharth Nagar colony, where I lived. When we arrived, it was already 6am. My house was small, measuring just 10 feet by 10 feet. I woke up some people sleeping on cots spread between two chawls, to make space for our friends to sit. Women in the locality were already busy with their morning chore of filling water. Water would not reach the upper floors due to low pressure, so they were fetching it from the tank below. I asked my wife to make tea for all of us. There was no milk in the house, so everyone was served black tea.

While we were sipping the hot tea, Raja Dhale, with a radiant face, was reading the special issue of *Saadhanaa*. None of the activists present was aware that his article would shake up society from its slumber. After the tea, Dhale took the magazine with him. I knew a vendor who sold copies of *Saadhanaa* in Girgaum. The following day, I bought another copy of the special issue from him on my way to office. It had a cover price of Re 1. The same issue, subsequently, after the controversy over the article "Black Independence Day", was sold out in the black market for Rs 10 per copy. It was after this controversy that the common reader came to know of the magazine called *Saadhanaa* being published from Pune.

First demonstration and arrest

Nominations to the Maharashtra Legislative Council were scheduled on 18 September 1972, leading to a clamour among aspirants to seek support. Among them were Hariharrao Sonule, Dadasaheb Rupavate and R.S. Gavai. Sonule was the seniormost among them, but Gavai was a shrewd politician. Gavai was the secretary, Vidarbha region, of the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement that fought for inclusion of Mumbai in Maharashtra when the then Bombay Province was bifurcated to create Gujarat and Maharashtra states. He had known Dadasaheb Gaikwad for years.

Dadasaheb Gaikwad was one of the members of the presidium formed to helm the Republican Party of India, following the lack of consensus on the leadership after Dr Ambedkar's death. The first meeting of the presidium was held in Ahmednagar. Rupavate was also one of the architects of the alliance between the Congress party and the Republican Party of India in 1967. He was briefly with the Durust Republican Party founded by B.C. Kamble. When Gaikwad rejected Rupavate's claim to seniority among the Republicans, he and Gavai went "dancing" to the Congress party, which was waiting for such political "dancers".

Chief Minister Vasantrao Naik accommodated Rupavate in his Cabinet as the minister of state for social welfare (the portfolio which is unofficially reserved for Dalit leaders). In 1972, when atrocities against Dalits were on the rise, triggering outrage, Rupavate was defending the government. A glaring example was his statement at a public meeting that the government was not responsible for the atrocities against Dalits. He was faithfully performing

his duty as his bosses' pet. Like a typical Congress leader, he started insulting Dalit leaders, praising Mahatma Gandhi and praying before Hindu gods and goddesses. Dalit youths hated him and were waiting to vent their ire.

On 18 September 1972, Dadasaheb Rupavate was to be felicitated by the Junnar Taluka Bauddhajan Sangh at the Panchayat Hall in the Bhoiwada area. I knew of the programme beforehand and when it was published in the newspapers, I issued a statement that the Dalit Panther would stage demonstrations at the venue. On the day of the programme the Bhoiwada area saw heavy police deployment. As youths started collecting, we decided to shout slogans of "Chale Jao" (Go Away). However, the heavy police presence made our task difficult.

A CID officer named Ingle told us to protest at a designated spot that was about 100 to 125 feet away from the venue. I rejected the offer and instead chose to protest at Mane Chowk, the traffic junction. The idea was to create a traffic jam for some time. Dhasal reached the spot with a group of youths. Rupavate's car had taken a different route, avoiding the junction where we were waiting for him, and arrived at the venue. Nevertheless, when Rupavate got out of his car, we started shouting slogans against him and the government. About 50 to 60 youths participated in the protest, while others like Arjun Dangle, who were afraid of the police, watched us from a distance. After about 45 minutes of sloganeering, we were arrested.

It was the first protest by the Dalit Panther and led to the first arrests. The next day, newspapers took note of the protest, naming me, Namdeo Dhasal and Latif Khatik as its leaders. Among those who participated in the protest and spoke were Namdeo Dhasal, Kamlakar Subhedar, Latif Khatik, Krishna Breed, Bhau Torsekar, Bhai Sangare, Ramdas Sorte and me. All of us resolved to protest at all public meetings of Rupavate, publicly prohibiting his appearance in Mumbai. Out of this protest rose a wave of opposition against Rupavate, with demands for his resignation, from several quarters.

After keeping Rupavate out of public meetings in Mumbai, like-

minded youths followed our example in other cities, too. For instance, when Rupavate visited Aurangabad on 19 September 1972 to address a meeting of the backward class government employees, about 400 youths waved black flags, shouted slogans and demanded his resignation. Rupavate became known as the destroyer of the Ambedkarite movement.

A Dalit farmer sacrificed

By forming the Dalit Panther and observing Independence Day as a "Black Day", we had got the youth thinking about these atrocities against helpless Dalits. We were, however, oblivious of a fresh incident that had taken place on 12 August 1972 at Erangaon, where a Dalit farmer Ramdas Narnavre had been brutally killed with "divine" sanction. The newspapers and we were focusing on the Bawda village incident and were unaware of the Erangaon case till August 15. Narnavre was not a pauper. He was tilling eight acres of land and living happily with four brothers, without having to work as a farm labourer. He had incurred the wrath of villagers owing to his self-respect and self-reliance. The villagers were waiting for an opportunity to teach him a lesson for not being servile to them. They found one when a cholera epidemic claimed two lives in the village. A meeting of villagers was held to discuss the calamity that had descended on the villagers. They arrived at a unanimous decision to "consult" the village goddess. The goddess then "possessed" a devotee and "told" the villagers that Ramdas Narnavre was the culprit – he visited the crematorium often to perform tantric rituals to invoke the "demon" and that that was the reason for the villagers' woes. The goddess' prescription to save the villagers was to bleed Ramdas Narnavre to death.

When villagers deliberated on the method of sacrificing Narnavre, they found the ideal method prescribed in *Manusmriti* – a holy book of Hindus which lays down laws of the caste system. They forcibly took him to the village head (Patil) of Patansavangi, the neighbouring village. Narnavre was killed in accordance with

the rules ordained in *Manusmriti*: they cut off his nose and ears before slitting his throat. They threw his body was into a well, where it floated for two days. There was no investigation or post-mortem, yet a death certificate was obtained from the government surgeon concerned, showing it as death due to drowning. Since the deceased was a Buddhist, the whole issue was hushed up. The dead body was buried. However, the media got an inkling of this gruesome murder, and the news started appearing in the dailies.

The ghastly murder of Ramdas Narnavre led to a fresh wave of protests, compelling the government to exhume the dead body. It was found that the nose and ears had been cut off. A 'panchnama' (preliminary investigation report) was prepared and nine persons were arrested. The incident shocked not just the Vidarbha region, but entire Maharashtra. An uneasy calm prevailed in the village, for everyone remained tight-lipped, fearing the wrath of the village head. The Khobragade faction of the RPI's Republican Students' Federation called a press conference in Nagpur on 31 August 1972. Its president Ranjit Meshram and secretary Balak Ramteke demanded that the Central Bureau of Investigation, instead of the Maharashtra Police, investigate the Erangaon case. They also demanded that Dalits be permitted to use guns for self-defence.

Durgabai Bhagwat's bizarre view

Durgabai Bhagwat was a respected author and considered to be a profound thinker. Her book of essays *Pais* had been awarded Sahitya Academy award in 1971. A women's organization, the Mumbai Dakshin Vibhag Stree Sanstha, had organized a function on 15 April 1972, in Colaba, Mumbai, to felicitate her. While speaking at the programme, Durgabai made a controversial remark that prostitutes and their profession deserved dignity and prestige. She said that she had accepted the chairpersonship of the Tamasha Parishad – representing Maharashtra's folk dancers – despite the popular belief that women performing in "tamashas" (raunchy folk dances and skits) were of loose character, because she wanted to understand their lives. Durgabai went further, saying that all cultures had made prostitution legal and that ancient Indian philosopher Kautilya had stressed the need for prostitutes. She said that prostitutes were an inherent part of society and rendered it stable by satiating the sexual needs of men, who would otherwise run amok. She added that prostitutes were protecting society and deserved prestige on a par with professionals like doctors, engineers and lawyers, and urged everyone else to learn to respect them.

Durgabai's statements triggered reactions from several quarters. Some considered her endorsement of prostitution very cheap. I remember reading a public statement asking her to become a prostitute. I threw away the statement because I did not feel it was worthy of preservation. Many progressive writers happened to read that statement, too. There was one more reason why progressive writers had castigated Durgabai. She was the main speaker at the release

of *Golpitha,* Namdeo Dhasal's volume of poetry. Budding poets, liberal organizations and aspiring Dalit writers had thronged the venue, the Rusi Mehta Hall in Tulsiwadi. Speaking on the occasion, Durgabai analyzed the book and unnecessarily started referring to Russian writers and poets. The audience did not like that and there were interruptions. In sharp contrast, they applauded Raja Dhale's speech, much to the chagrin of Durgabai. There was a clamour among those present for a chance to register their protest. Samajwadi Yuvjan Sabha and Yuvak Kranti Dal asked Hussein Dalwai (who went on to become an MP and spokesperson of the Congress party) to speak. He lambasted Russian poets instead of speaking on Dhasal's poetry. Senior Dalit writer Baburao Bagul was also present. Dhasal's father Laxmanbaba released the book. He had become restless because of the ruckus and was looking at me helplessly.

Durgabai nursed a grudge against Dhale because he had rubbished her claims. She was waiting for an opportunity to put Dhale in his place. She belonged to the *Saadhanaa* group, which believed in civilized behaviour. After Dhale's article, "Black Independence Day" was published in *Saadhanaa*, she wrote a letter to Marathi newspaper *Maharashtra Times*. The newspaper published her letter in the issue dated 24 August 1972. She did not say anything about his comments on the national flag, but she did express concern over Dhale's language, pointing out the need to maintain decorum while writing. She did not stop at that. She snapped her links with the *Saadhanaa* group. Her reaction to Dhale's article did not go unnoticed. A meeting of the Pune Municipal Corporation held on 29 August 1972 passed a resolution condemning *Saadhanaa* for printing the controversial article. There were 18 members in support and two against. The resolution also demanded that Dhale, along with the editor Yadunath Thatte and executive editor Dr Anil Avchat, be prosecuted. Jittery over the development, Thatte and Avchat tendered their resignations to S.M. Joshi, trustee of the weekly.

Shiv Sena leader Shrikant Shirole was not satisfied with a mere resolution in the meeting of the civic body. On 2 September 1972, he held a protest march to *Saadhanaa*'s office. Joshi met the pro-

testors and told them that the trust had accepted the resignations of Thatte and Avchat. However, he failed to pacify Shirole and his supporters. They demanded that Joshi himself apologize publicly and shut down the periodical, failing which they would burn down the printing press. Joshi apologized. The meeting of the municipal corporation was adjourned in protest. Some students burnt copies of *Saadhanaa*. An effigy of Thatte was burnt. Tension prevailed in Pune as Congress and Sena supporters took to the streets. Ultimately, the Pune city police registered a criminal case against Thatte and Dhale.

The conquest of Pune

Pune was the seat of the Peshwa rulers, who were Brahmins. It continues to be a largely conservative city dominated by the Maharashtrian elite. Raja Dhale's controversial article had created a sensation and the conservatives were looking for the right moment to hit back. So, on 10 September, when the Maharashtra government scheduled a Cabinet meeting in Pune, the city Congress unit scheduled a protest march to *Saadhanaa*'s office. The protestors had already threatened to burn it down. We realized that *Saadhanaa* was isolated and in trouble and needed support. We decided to hold a counter-protest on the same day to oppose the Congress march.

We arrived in Pune and met our local chief Anil Kamble. When our protest march started, we were surprised at the response from youth. We had not canvassed for the march, but numerous youths joined us in a spontaneous outpouring of support. In another part of the city, the Congress party had taken out its march with the support of the Shiv Sena. They were shouting "Burn down *Saadhanaa* Press", while our counter-protest slogan was "Our *Saadhanaa* will not burn". Since both the marches were heading towards the same destination – the *Saadhanaa* printing press – soon we were face-to-face with them. Sloganeering from both sides reach its peak, creating tension in the area. Police personnel were deployed to prevent any untoward incident, but some youths pelted stones at us and ran away. Our youths ran after them, but they got into some house and could not be traced. The incident infuriated our boys, who held the placards upside down in their hands and raising the sticks, charged at the Congress and Shiv Sena protestors. Our ag-

gression was such that the Congress and Shiv Sena activists got cold feet and ran helter-skelter. During such incidents, shops are looted, but since that was not our intention, we just kept shouting slogans. Our mission had been accomplished and those who had threatened to burn down the *Saadhanaa* press had dispersed.

When we reached the Saadhanaa office, trustee S.M. Joshi and editor Yadhunath Thatte were waiting for us at the entrance. They welcomed us. Executive editor Anil Avchat introduced us to Thatte and Joshi. We were acquainted only with Avchat, who was of our age. We were taken to the "Antar-Bharati" Hall, where a meeting was held. The hall was not big enough to accommodate all of us. Many could get space only to stand. Even veteran socialist leaders like N.G. Gore could not be seated comfortably in the overcrowded hall. The hero of the meeting was Raja Dhale. Many youths from Mumbai, who were not known to us, like J.B. Gambre, had come to Pune to participate in our agitation. When we were asked to introduce ourselves, we were surprised to see unknown faces claiming to be members of the Dalit Panther. A youth from Govandi in Mumbai said that he was a Dalit Panther activist. We were pleased that the youth were joining the Dalit Panther without us having to mobilize them, for we had yet to form our "chhawni" (literally "tent") – local branch – in Govandi.

I was sitting next to Joshi, and he was asking me names of the speakers. He was meeting them for the first time. After a while, I found myself in the same position as Joshi as unknown faces started speaking in support of Dhale and *Saadhanaa*. I had to request the speakers to first introduce themselves before starting their speech. Both Joshi and I took notes. Speaking on the occasion, Dhale defended his stand and refused to apologize. He challenged the government to prosecute him, drawing applause from the audience. After Mumbai, we were gaining support in Pune.

Namdeo Dhasal delivered the most provocative speech at the meeting. He lambasted the socialists, including their veteran leader, N.G. Gore, who was present at the meeting. Referring to Gore's speech on restructuring society, he said that it was like a speech delivered for the "Antar-Bharati" audience – socialist interns.

Dhasal said that Gore's theories on fanaticism and reformation of society were baseless. His outbursts shocked Joshi, Thatte, Avchat and Baba Adhav. He was venting his ire against socialists and I could see where he was coming from.

Our foray into the sociopolitical life of Pune was actually an attempt to challenge the people of a city that was once the seat of power of Peshwa rulers. For the people of Pune, a counter-protest to challenge a protest march was something unheard of. When we took to the streets, our opponents scampered away and our counter-protest succeeded in reining in the conservatives. The *Saadhanaa* people were happy that we had scuttled a demonstration of potential arsonists. Baba Adhav, was, however, unhappy over the outbursts of Dhasal against socialists, including Gore. But he was helpless. Later that day, Dhasal, while addressing a gathering at the venue of the Cabinet meeting, launched a scathing attack on chief minister Vasantrao Naik. The Pune police swung into action. They did not actually arrest Dhasal, but they mentioned his arrest in the documents. They also prepared papers of releasing him on bail. Interestingly, he was granted bail on Baba Adhav's surety.

Yuvak Kranti Dal, Yuvak Aghadi, Rastra Seva Dal and Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha had been part of our counter-protest. The Muslim Satyashodhak Mandal had expressed its inability to participate. The prominent youth leaders from Mumbai taking part in the march were Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Latif Khatik, Prahlad Chendwankar and me. We were, however, irked over not being able to teach a lesson to Shirole, who had issued threats on September 2, but vanished on 10 September. Moreover, S.M. Joshi apologizing in the face of Shirole's arrogance pricked us. On September 11, youths took out a funeral procession of *Manusmriti* in Aurangabad. Yuvak Kranti Dal and Backward Class Post-Graduates' Association had organized the procession to protest against the gruesome murder at Erangaon.

First mass arrests and imprisonment

Minister of State D.T. Rupavate and his stance on issues pertaining to Dalits came as a blessing in disguise for us. He belonged to Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district and a large number of people from his district were living in localities from Chandanwadi to Saat Rasta. Consequently, because of our agitation demanding his resignation, Dalit Panthers got unexpected, fast publicity by word of mouth. It contributed towards building up opinion against the policies of the government.

Meanwhile, union minister Jagjivan Ram's visit to Mumbai was announced. He was Congress party's Dalit face. He was unperturbed by the Elayaperumal committee's findings on atrocities against Dalits, though the report had revealed just the tip of the iceberg. On the contrary, despite representing Dalits in the Congress, he used to claim that he was proud of being a Hindu and that Untouchables converting to Buddhism would not get any concessions. His outbursts had made Buddhists hostile towards him. He could have spoken up in Parliament about atrocities against Dalits and that would have led to solidarity among MPs from his party as well as the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe MPs from other parties. However, he chose to keep quiet, because he did not have the courage to face up to the wrath of the Congress leadership.

He was not even able to speak up against casteist insults hurled at him despite being a union minister. He had attended the unveiling ceremony of a statue of Dr Sampoornanand Swami and touched it. The orthodox people present at the ceremony brought Ganges River's "holy water" and washed the statue while chanting mantras,

because his touch had "polluted" it. He did not utter a word in protest.

So, when we came to know of Jagjivan Ram's decision to visit Mumbai to address a programme of the backward class employees, his hypocrisy enraged us. We planned to stage a protest. The function was to be held at Tilak Bhavan, headquarters of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee, on 24 September 1972.

An unpleasant incident preceded the agitation. One of our activists, Ramdas Sorte, nursed a grudge against Namdeo Dhasal and Sorte ended up slapping Dhasal. Sorte believed that Dhasal was deliberately ignoring him and promoting Latif Khatik. Sorte's name was missing from news reports that listed those arrested during the protest against Rupavate. Dhasal, Latif Khatik and I were arrested according to those reports. Latif belonged to the Samajwadi Yuvak Sanghatana; one of his associates, Kamlakar Subhedar, was not arrested. Latif's slogans and speeches used to instil life in agitations. He introduced the slogan "Halla Bol" (say attack), which made him famous in police circles.

When Dhasal issued a press release announcing the agitation against Jagjivan Ram, he lambasted Jagjivan Ram for his servility. He stated that Jagjivan Ram had no right to address the gathering of backward class employees. The press release had just two names – Namdeo Dhasal and Kamlakar Subhedar. Even my name was missing. However, Sorte felt slighted. On 24 September, we were standing near the public toilet on Jairajbhai Lane, discussing details of the agitation. Sorte claimed that we were slighting him. This led to a heated argument. I tried to quell it, but Dhasal and Sorte continued to hurl expletives at each other, drawing a crowd. In a fit of rage, Sorte slapped Dhasal.

I became angry with Sorte. Dhasal, too, was a street-fighter, but the need of the hour was to prevent a flare-up. I asked Sorte to go home in a raised voice. He went away abusing Dhasal. Furious and humiliated over being insulted in front of several people, but unable to hit back, Dhasal declared that he would not participate in the agitation. I pacified him by saying that this was a crucial juncture and unity was very important. I told him that the public protest against

Jagjivan Ram was more important than our personal differences. Finally, he agreed to participate.

At Tilak Bhavan, police personnel outnumbered protestors. As we protested, the presence of a large posse of policemen drew curious onlookers, thus indirectly helping publicize the Dalit Panther. Jagjivan Ram, ironically, was a lieutenant of Babasaheb Ambedkar and an office-bearer of the Scheduled Castes' Federation that was founded by the latter. But, later, he joined the Congress party and fell for the luxury offered by political positions. He had even gone to the extent of opposing Buddhists, and this had irked us.

The agitation culminated in the arrest of 64 Dalit Panther youths. This was the first mass arrest of the Dalit Panther. When the personnel from the Bhoiwada Police Station picked us up for agitating against Rupavate, we were detained just till the function had concluded. They then took our fingerprints and let us go. However, during the protest at Dadar, the police vehicles took us straight to the Saat Rasta jail. In the vehicle, there was Ingle, a sub-inspector from the Special Branch 1 (Hindu Branch), with whom I was acquainted. PSI Ingle, who was one of the older police officers and probably a departmental promotee, used to address me as "Jaya". During those days, veteran Dalit writer Daya Pawar was at the peak of his literary career. By a strange coincidence of phonetics, some people, including the policemen, used to mistake me for Daya Pawar. Even one of the high-profile police officers, Arvind Inamdar, had once admitted the goof-up. People used to think I was Daya Pawar, the writer, and that the real Daya Pawar was Dalit Panther activist Jaya Pawar. This would annoy Daya Pawar no end because he had to repeatedly tell them that wasn't the case.

After our arrests, even PSI Ingle was probably unaware that we would be put in prison. It appeared that Jagjivan Ram was annoyed with us and had directed police officials to take strict action. As the police vehicle carrying us stopped at the gate of the prison, PSI Ingle introduced me to the jailor Kshirsagar. PSI Ingle told me that if I got stuck in the jail, it would create problems for all those arrested, as their families would need my help in securing bails. He spoke to the jailor over the issue. When we were stuffed into the

police vehicles, our names had not been recorded. So, the jailor, Kshirsagar, did not take me in. He kept me aside and put the others behind bars. After the procedure was completed, PSI Ingle, who had written down the names of the arrested, and I left the jail premises. I had a tough time visiting houses of each and every youth, conveying the news and arranging for their release. My job had become more difficult because many of those arrested had given their nicknames. When I visited Dalit settlements to meet families of the youths, I had to face their anger. Some abused me for provoking the youths, while others threatened me of dire consequences if the bail were not granted immediately. I had no option but to put up with their ire and the humiliation.

It was clear that the government wanted to teach us a lesson. Hence, instead of keeping the protestors in police custody for some time, they put them in judicial custody. Obtaining bails for the 64 youths was a tedious process but I managed to get them out. Most of those arrested belonged to the Saat Rasta area, including Hiraman Sangare, Vijay Tanaji Kadam, Dadabhau Salve, Suresh Bhadrige and the Phulpagar brothers. It was crucial to have the youths released on bail, for, otherwise, they would have never participated in our agitations in the future.

All of them were released the next day. I took them near a tree opposite BIT Chawl No 2 in Saat Rasta and garlanded all 64 of them for their bravery. The garland had cost me just one anna (six paise), but the felicitation made them feel proud. The felicitation secured full support of the youths, especially those residing in Saat Rasta area, for the future agitations of the Dalit Panther. Since Dhasal and I used to live in the same area, our bond became stronger. Another achievement for us was that sectarianism among Dalit youths as a result of the different regions to which they belonged – like Vidarbha, Marathwada, Konkan and Western Maharashtra – vanished. We were able to foster unity among them. The Saat Rasta area became the powerhouse of the Dalit Panther. We appointed Hiraman Sangare as the divisional chief and Vijay Kadam as his deputy. Later, Hiraman changed his first name to "Bhai" and went on to become one of the most important leaders

of the Dalit Panther. His aggression and oratory made him popular.

The mass arrest of Dalit Panthers might have bolstered Jagjivan Ram's ego but it also helped us consolidate our support base and reach out to villages across the state of Maharashtra. This mass arrest proved crucial in inspiring youths from villages, especially in Thane and Pune districts.

Planning the burning of the holy book

Dr Ambedkar Vichar Darshan Association of Patkar College, Goregaon, hosted a seminar on Raja Dhale's controversial article in *Saadhanaa* on 9 October 1972. The chief organizer was Prof S.S. Yadav and those invited on the occasion were Jana Sangh MLA Prof G.B. Kanitkar, socialist MLA Mrinal Gore, Prof Gopal Dukhande from the Yuvak Kranti Dal, Buddhist writer Sharad Mahatekar and Raja Dhale. Dalit writer Prof Keshav Meshram presided over the discussion.

Speaking on the occasion, Dhale spoke aggressively, challenging his detractors. He accused them of being perverts and said that he was willing to be hanged till death if his views were proved meaningless. He criticized the holy books, including the Vedas of Hindus, pointing out that they were composed by non-Aryans in Prakrit script and later translated into Sanskrit by Brahmins. He rubbished the claim of Hindus that the Vedas were not written by human beings but were divinely ordained. He added that the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were written by Vyas and Valmiki, respectively, both of whom belonged to the Koli caste. Referring to the anger of Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray over Buddhist youths not showing respect towards holy books of Hindus, he said that Buddhist youths would gather at the next Shiv Sena rally in Shivaji Park to make a bonfire of such holy books. The audience applauded Dhale and raised slogans in his honour. Mrinal Gore spoke in support of what Dhale had written in *Saadhanaa*, saying that Dhale intended not to insult the national flag but to draw attention to the plight of Dalits. Sharad Mahatekar, too, voiced his

support for Dhale and asked why action had not been taken against Anand Hardikar, who in his book on Mahatma Gandhi had stated that the national flag should be trampled because it contained the Ashok Chakra incorporated by Dr Ambedkar. G.B. Kanitkar had no answer to this question and could not counter the arguments made in favour of Dhale. Gopal Dukhande observed that in the past, empathizers like Mahatma Phule had led the struggle against inequality and that it was time the victims going through the horrible experiences took it forward themselves. Meshram presided over the seminar with grace. After the seminar, all eyes were on Shivaji Park, where the bonfire was planned.

Dhale became a much-sought-after leader, with several organizations in Mumbai and suburbs vying with one another to host his talks. On 21 October, "Apna Bazar Parivar" invited Dhale to speak in its Sarfare series of lectures. The programme received an overwhelming response from youths. A group of youths shouted slogans against Dhale, accusing him of insulting Sita – the wife of Ram in the epic *Ramayana*. The police personnel present at the venue drove away the agitators. The subject of the lecture was Dhale's controversial article and it wasn't the organizers but Namdeo Dhasal who introduced Dhale to the audience. Dhale delivered a highly provocative speech and reiterated that the holy texts of Hindus, which were the root cause of atrocities against Dalits, would be burnt down in protest. He was emerging as the leader of the Dalit Panther. However, in his enthusiasm, he also declared that he would launch a new social organization committed to the thoughts of Dr Ambedkar. I was surprised, because the Dalit Panther was an Ambedkarite organization and there was no need for another outfit. I did not ask Dhale or Dhasal about it, for the social atmosphere was so charged with the launch of the Dalit Panther that there was no scope for a new organization to take shape. Besides, Dhale himself realized this was the case and started saying publicly that the Dalit Panther was an organization committed to the thoughts of Dr Ambedkar.

Religious hostility mounted and there used to be riots wherever Dhale or Dhasal addressed public meetings. Activists of the Shiv

Sena used to lead the riots, apparently under instructions of their party chief. One such riot broke out on 23 October 1972 in Kalyan during a lecture at Nagar Mandir. The speakers were Dhale and Dhasal. Shiv Sena activists pelted stones and soda-water bottles to disrupt the meeting. Youths in the audience retaliated. The police arrested nine youths: Murlidhar Ambre, Hanuman Shinde, Pravin Pandya, Kishor Tekia, Baliram Bharade, Shivaji Jagtap, Ramesh Salunkhe, Ram Bhepate and Tatya Gite. It was the first riot that Dalit Panther was caught in.

Action committee to redress atrocities

In the run-up to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Mumbai on November 2, a meeting of the Action Committee to Redress Atrocities was convened at Anand Bhavan, Fort, in Mumbai, in accordance with the resolution passed by the Dhammachakka Anupavattan Din meeting. The action committee decided to submit a memorandum to Mrs Gandhi on the increasing atrocities against Dalits. Arjun Dangle and I were appointed general secretaries of the committee.

I had no objection over handing over a memorandum to the prime minister, but I was of the opinion that the Maharashtra government, which had failed to curb atrocities, should also be condemned. P.T. Borale, the chair of the meeting, couldn't accept my suggestion as many of those present had links with the Congress party while others did not want to invite the wrath of those in power. I insisted on condemning the government for its failure to deliver justice. When my suggestion was shot down, I immediately resigned from the committee and walked out of the meeting. I expected Dangle, too, to follow me, but he stayed put. Dangle said that for him the action committee was more important than the Dalit Panther and that he was going to sever his links with the Dalit Panther. He continued to remain general secretary of the committee.

Commenting on the episode, M.D. Tamhanekar, a journalist with the newspaper *Nav Shakti*, wrote that in its meeting held at Anand Bhavan, the committee had dropped the Dalit Panther, which, it claimed, wanted to betray Dr Ambedkar's social move-

ment by burning religious books, thus hurting the religious sentiments of Hindus and creating a rift among castes and religions.

This begs the question that if the Dalit Panther was so anti-social or criminal why was it invited for the meeting and why were Dangle and I made general secretaries of the committee in the same meeting? V.S. Asware, of the Republican Kranti Dal, used the occasion to vent his anger against us. He said that Republicans should not entertain the Dalit Panther and that his organization would do everything it could to wipe it out. Ironically, it was Asware's Republican Kranti Dal that vanished into thin air shortly after.

Nava Kaal, reported that the committee had sacked Dalit Panther. The truth was that Dangle was no longer with us and I had walked out in protest, so there was no question of sacking the Dalit Panther from the committee. To clear the confusion, we issued a public statement saying that the Dalit Panther had willingly dropped out of the committee and also sacked Dangle. Raja Dhale, Umesh Mane and Sharad Landge signed the statement. In the statement, we also pointed out that Babasaheb Ambedkar had publicly burnt *Manusmriti* – a holy book of Hindus – in 1927 and that we were following in his footsteps and not betraying the cause as the action committee alleged.

The committee had formed a delegation to hand over a memorandum to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on November 2. The delegation included R.S. Gavai, Prof P.T. Borale, advocate Ashok Nile, Ghanshyam Talwatkar and legislator Shantabai Dani. Advocate Bajirao Kamble said that that the victims of caste atrocity in Bawda would be part of the team. Among those who were present at the meeting in Anand Bhavan were R.S. Gavai, N.H. Kumbhare, Shantabai Dani, Ghanshyam Talwatkar, D.G. Jadhav and Ashok Nile.

Dangle broke all ties with the Dalit Panther and remained aloof from our activities. On the other hand, the action committee he was part of stayed away from all action, making him restless. The limbo ended when Namdeo Dhasal was sacked from the Dalit Panther two years later and formed a rival group on 9 October 1974. Dangle joined him along with Prahlad Chendwankar, Bal Khairmode,

Jaidev Gaikwad, L.D. Bhosale, Vijay Jadhav and S.R. Gaikwad. Dangle thus had no links with the Dalit Panther from 29 October 1972 to 9 October 1974.

The month of November 1972 turned out to be very hectic for us as we were busy opening new branches, up to four in a single day. The response we got was overwhelming and we were not able to stop the youths from joining the Dalit Panther. Meanwhile, Dhale's lectures were the much sought after and he was not able to honour all invitations. While he used to deliver most of the lectures, some of the organizers would get cold feet and cancel the engagement. Nagrik Vikas Mandal had organized one such lecture at Kala Chowki. Intimidated by Shiv Sena activists, the group cancelled the event.

Participation of non-Buddhist youths

It was obvious that a chunk of the support for the Dalit Panther came from Buddhist youths, but it was not an exclusively Buddhist organization. Non-Buddhist youths, who were reading Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's books, were becoming aware of the socio-economic, political and religious realities. Their major stumbling block was Buddhism. The Babasaheb of the period up to 13 October 1956 was acceptable to them but the Babasaheb, who converted to Buddhism along with his followers on 14 October 1956, posed a problem. They were not able to rebel against their traditional families who had remained in the Hindu fold. Babasaheb's mantra of "Educate, Agitate and Organize" was well known. They could "educate and agitate" but were not able to organize. Politically, they were closer to the Congress party than the Republican Party of India, because their families had always supported the Congress and even the Republicans were split into three groups. Culturally, it was difficult for them to organize because the followers of Dr Ambedkar had converted to Buddhism, while they, despite being Dalits, had remained Hindus. The unification of the two cultures was impossible. Social unity was also a distant dream because castes and sub-castes ran in the blood. They used to practise casteism, taking pride in their own castes dictated by xenophobic Hindu divisions that confined people in a particular caste. The confinement did not end with caste – there were sub-castes, too. One sub-caste abhorred the other, even though both were in the same caste. In the traditional system, servility to the upper castes ensured freedom from any kind of atrocity. However, the younger, educated generation was finding

it difficult to come to terms with their position in the traditional system. Though such youths were a miniscule minority, they were still a cause for optimism. Some of them used to help Buddhist youths and were living at the Siddharth Vihar students' hostel in Wadala, Mumbai.

One of them was Vitthalrao Sathe, who belonged to the Matang community. He, too, had become restless because of rising atrocities against Dalits. He used to work independently, but after the Dalit Panther was formed, he became one of its supporters. He wrote an article in the newspaper *Nava Kaal* on 29 October 1972. My office was close to the *Nava Kaal* office and I used to pay a visit almost daily to submit press releases. At times, Dattaram Baraskar would ask me to proof articles the newspaper had received. One of them happened to be Sathe's. After it was published, we got our first non-Buddhist leader.

Sathe had written about Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's resignation as the first law minister of the country when Parliament rejected the Hindu Code Bill that he had moved to grant equality to women with respect to property rights. Sathe demanded resignations of veteran Dalit leaders like R.S. Gavai and Dadasaheb Rupavate who had sold out to the ruling Congress party. He also urged Dalits to give up their belief in castes and sub-castes to struggle unitedly by supporting the Dalit Panther. Though his appeal turned out to be futile – the response was insignificant – we found a good non-Buddhist orator. Namdeo Dhasal got a colleague who could go anywhere, anytime. This was important as others like Bhai and Avinash Mahatekar and I were not available full-time because of our jobs. Dhasal and Sathe had no such commitments.

There are some caste-defined Dalit settlements in Mumbai like Annabhau Sathe Nagar, Valmiki Nagar and Rohidas Panchayat, where Sathe used to visit and put forward Dalit Panther's viewpoint. He used to live in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar and whenever we visited his house, we found his wife Rukmini to be a good host. We received good response, not just from Buddhists but even non-Buddhists in many districts of Maharashtra. Gradually, castes and sub-castes disappeared among our Dalit supporters. In Vidarbha

region, for instance, over a dozen castes vanished and motivated youths joined us. It was a revolution of sorts that involved a transformation of the mind and the scrapping of the concept of caste- and sub-caste-based leadership.

Raja Dhale's arrest and release

Raja Dhale was arrested in Mumbai on 10 November 1972 for showing disrespect to the national flag. The Maharashtra government, which knew that his imprisonment would spark strong reactions across the state, released him on bail the same day. Since he was arrested for his allegedly incendiary article in *Saadhanaa*, it evoked an overwhelming response from the youths of Pune, from where the weekly was published. They decided to join the Dalit Panther with all their might. Dhasal belonged to Pune and many of his relatives, including Jaidev Gaikwad, lived in the city.

When we took out that protest march to the *Saadhanaa* office in support of the weekly, the organization was not well knit. Hence, we held a public meeting in Pune on 26 November 1972 to formally launch the branch of the Dalit Panther in city. Before the public meeting, a rally was held in the morning at Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Memorial Hall in Modikhana. The hall was overflowing with youths because it had been announced that Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and I would address it. Some members of the B.C. Kamble faction of the Republican Party of India tried to disrupt the meeting.

An activist, Laxman Kamble, hurled a volley of questions at Dhale, to which Dhale said that all the questions would be answered in the public meeting in the evening. However, Kamble was not satisfied and demanded immediate answers. This prompted Dhasal to say that the Dalit Panther came into being because the Republican Party as envisaged by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar was non-existent. He accused veteran Republican leaders of murdering

the ideology of Dr Ambedkar and turning a blind eye to the rising atrocities against Dalits. He added that if the government failed in curbing atrocities, Dalitstan – a separate settlement for Dalits – would become a reality. The discussion had to be wound up as the audience became restless with Dhasal's outbursts. There was tension in the air. In the evening, the public meeting took place as scheduled in the Bheempura area, where the Dalit Panther was formally launched. Dhasal, Dhale and I spoke and Anil Kamble was appointed the Pune city chief. Numerous youths joined the organization.

After the Pune meeting, we took up the case of a celebrated teacher from the Matang community, Nikalje Guruji. The upper-caste teachers had discriminated against him because he was a Dalit. We launched an agitation to highlight this injustice based on caste.

First public rally at Chaityabhoomi

The Dalit Panther held the first rally in Siddharth Nagar (on Baptist Road, Kamathipura), Mumbai, on 9 July 1972. This was followed by the inauguration of branches in numerous Dalit localities of central Mumbai. The first public rally on 2 October 1972 at Sheth Motishah Lane (known as Love Lane) evoked an overwhelming response from Dalit youths, who came not only from Mumbai city but also the suburbs. It was the time when the Shiv Sena appealed to the youths, among whom a large number were Dalits.

The older generation of Republican leaders had failed to attract Dalit youths. Shiv Sena suited their militant spirit. The profiles of youths active in the Shiv Sena since its formation in 1966 to the establishment of Dalit Panther in 1972 revealed that most of the street-fighters were Dalits. Those from upper castes, with surnames like Joshi and Kulkarni, were not foot soldiers, while those with surnames like Tawde, Gawde and Nalawde were busy selling *Batata Wadas*, Mumbai's popular street food. The leadership of the Shiv Sena was upper-caste but its street-fighters were from the lower castes. After the formation of the Dalit Panther, Dalit youths in the Shiv Sena started opening branches of Dalit Panther in predominantly Dalit localities and slums across the suburbs of Mumbai. This led to friction and riots at several places. I had to spend a lot of time attending to such cases in police stations and courts.

The first public rally of youths from Mumbai city and suburban areas was held on 6 December 1972 at Chaityabhoomi, Dadar, at 8am. It was the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar. Every year,

hundreds of thousands of his followers visit Chaityabhoomi (where he was laid to rest) on the night of December 5 and 6 to pay tribute to him. Some even visit Cuffe Parade to offer floral tribute at his statue on the night of 5 December. Bhai Sangare and I issued a public statement asking youths to visit the statue of Dr Ambedkar at Cuffe Parade and then assemble at Chaityabhoomi

Our appeal was published in several Marathi newspapers like *Maratha*, *Nava Kaal*, *Sandhyakaal* and *Nav Shakti* on December 5. These were the only newspapers that used to publish news about our activities, though they never used to send their reporters to cover the events. A day or two after a meeting, I used to draft a press release and send it to these newspaper offices. They used to publish it according to their convenience, at times taking a week to do so. One of the reasons was that communication facilities were scarce. There were no fax machines or photocopiers or even typewriters. I used to scribble press releases on paper and use carbon paper to get multiple copies.

However, these newspapers used to list the time and venue of our meetings in their day's listings, thereby enabling hundreds of youths to attend our meetings. Even *Maharashtra Times* – the Marathi newspaper from The Times of India group – published the news about our first rally.

The rally at Chaityabhoomi was scheduled for 8am but as it was the death anniversary of Dr Ambedkar, a huge crowd had already gathered by 6am. We had also announced that Raja Dhale would address the gathering. However, we could not neither construct a stage nor arrange for electric supply for the loudspeakers. Ultimately, I rented a handcart from a hawker. We started the rally with the handcart as our stage and a megaphone. Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar addressed the rally while I moderated the event. The rally ended around noon under heavy police deployment.

While concluding the rally, I announced that a protest march would be taken out the next day to the office of the Central Bank of India. The bank had started recruitment, but Dalit youths weren't among the recruits. The march was to begin at Siddharth College's

Anand Bhavan and head to the bank at Hutatma Chowk. The announcement led to heavy deployment of police personnel in the area because the bank manager, Poochkhanwala, a Parsi, feared violence. With the intervention of PSI Ingle, who was always tracking our activities, our delegation met Poochkhanwala in the presence of police personnel. When we met, I reprimanded him – I knew some Persian – for not employing Dalits and doing away with reservation backlogs. He claimed he could not get candidates. I pointed a finger at Jagdish Ramteke, who was with us in the delegation, and said that he was a candidate. The manager agreed and completed the recruitment formalities the following day. Ramteke went on to become the leader of Central Bank of India's backward class staff association and was feared for his links with us. However, gradually he became autocratic and this gave rise to factionalism in the bank association. He, then, raised funds for launching a newspaper, but before he could actually launch it, he died. A capable youth like Ramteke met with untimely death due to his overconfidence.

A day before our rally at Chaityabhoomi, a meeting of the Dalit Panther was held in Kalyan, where Raja Dhale inaugurated a new branch. P.S. Rokde was appointed the local chief. Chandrakant Kasbe and Bhimnath Jadhav had accompanied Dhale to the meeting while I and Bhai Sangare had stayed behind for the preparations for the Chaityabhoomi event. On the day of the Chaityabhoomi rally, an editorial in *Nava Kaal* appreciated the leadership of our organization. It praised us and criticized the senior Republican leaders. It stated that unlike the senior Republican leaders, Babasaheb Ambedkar never indulged in vindictive politics and therefore his politics was never destructive. We found an ardent supporter in *Nava Kaal*.

After the Chaityabhoomi rally, we were flooded with invitations from across Mumbai and rural areas of Maharashtra for opening branches of the Dalit Panther. We responded by opening a branch in Ulhasnagar, a suburb of Mumbai, on 2 December and appointed N.S. Bhaisane the local head. Similarly, in Worli, we opened a branch on 9 December 1972. While inaugurating the Worli branch,

Dhale said that our organization comprised active youths involved in fighting injustice and asked why the Shiv Sena was attacking Hindus from Madras if it claimed to be a saviour of Hinduism. Dhasal, Vitthalrao Sathe, Ramdas Sorte, Bhai Sangare and I also addressed the gathering. Jairam Bhiku Ruke was appointed the branch head. On 16 December 1972, the Vikhroli branch was inaugurated. Speaking on the occasion, Sangare said that the idol of Vithoba – the deity in Pandharpur – was originally an idol of Gautam Buddha. He also said that the Dalit Panther was against the diktats in the holy books of Hindus. On 15 December 1972, a meeting was convened at Dr Ambedkar Colony, Yunus Koda's quarry, in Parel, which was a stronghold of Shiv Sena leader Wamanrao Mahadik. Dhale, Sangare, Madhu Avdhupkar and I addressed the meeting. Mahadik's supporters attempted to disrupt the meeting, but our boys gave a befitting reply. The incident inspired Dalit youths to open more branches in Mumbai.

While we were busy expanding our organization, R.S. Gavai called a press conference in Nagpur on 9 December 1972 to claim that he had held a statewide agitation in which 250,000 people had participated. It was a blatant lie circulated by the police and government sources. On 14 December 1972, Malan Haribhau Jagtap died after she was raped in Bhugaon village, Mulshi, in Pune district. The Pune unit of the Dalit Panther took to the streets on 26 December 1972 in protest. Hundreds of activists including Anil Kamble, Jaidev Gaikwad and L.D. Bhosale visited the village. The impact was such that the village panchayat members as well as all the important people in the village apologized and vowed to bring the culprit to justice. In Bhugaon, Avinash Mahatekar spearheaded the agitation, which in turn inspired similar protests in rural Maharashtra. Consequently, a number of cases across the state were referred to me.

In Delhi, a discussion on atrocities against Dalits was held and the minister of state for home Ramnivas Mirdha revealed that during 1969-70, five Dalits were burnt alive, 85 incidents of arson were recorded and 1,541 people were tortured. Of the houses burnt down, 28 were in Madhya Pradesh, 13 in Uttar Pradesh, 12 in

Orissa, nine in Tamilnadu, six in Maharashtra and five in Rajasthan. The actual number of incidents was much larger. If 28 houses were burnt down in Madhya Pradesh, how could the number be only 13 in Uttar Pradesh, a state which is notorious for caste atrocities? During the discussion, Pranab Mukherjee, then a union deputy minister, suggested that entire villages be fined wherever such incidents took place. The minister said that the suggestion would be seriously considered. The Dalit Panther had already demanded punishment for the entire villages where caste atrocities were committed.

RPI-Khobragade's programme

The Khobragade faction of the Republican Party of India announced a nationwide agitation starting on 17 October 1972. They demanded fundamental changes to the electoral system. They also asked the government to rein in inflation. The agitation evoked good response and about 17,000 people participated. Besides, the party accused the government of shielding the perpetrators of atrocities against Dalits.

On the other hand, Deekshabhoomi (the place in Nagpur where Dr Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with his followers on 14 October 1956) was at the centre of a controversy. The state government had wanted to hand over the management of Deeksha Bhoomi to the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha (Buddhist Society of India). However, R.S. Gavai floated his Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Smarak Samiti for the purpose and had his way.

Dr Bhadant Anand Kausalyan used to stay in Deekshabhoomi and wanted to construct a house for Mahasthaveer Chandramani, the monk who performed the conversion ceremony of Dr Ambedkar. There was nothing objectionable in the proposal, and Kausalyan had the support of the locals, but Gavai's samiti did not want to share the donations with anyone and hence opposed it.

On 29 October 1972, the Deekshabhoomi, which symbolized the messenger of peace, turned into a battlefield as a riot broke out between the supporters of Gavai's Samiti and Bhante Kausalyan. The police had to lob teargas shells to control stone-pelting mobs of around 800 youths. The Deekshabhoomi was littered with stones as police personnel started arresting the rioters. The court issued a

ban on the entry of some people and the police had to step in. The high-handedness of the Samiti was totally against the norms of the Dhamma. The police arrested 121 youths for rioting.

A few days later, senior Republican leaders Dadasaheb Gaikwad and Rajabhau Khobragade embarked on a joint venture that pleased Dalits. On 1 November 1972, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was on a tour of Maharashtra and had arrived at Raj Bhavan (the governor's official residence), the two factions of Republican Party of India led by Gaikwad and Khobragade submitted a memorandum to her.

A joint protest march preceded this event. Youths participating in such marches usually let their anger go out of hand. It was no different this time. Some youths attempted to stop the convoy of Mrs Gandhi by throwing themselves on the road. They were promptly arrested and only released when she left Mumbai. R.S. Gavai, Bajirao Kamble, Shantabai Dani and R.R. Dani addressed the protestors.

These Republican leaders who participated in the joint protest march had promised that they would remain united to work for the welfare of Dalits. However, the unity was confined to just two factions of Gaikwad and Khobragade. The Kamble faction stayed away from the attempts to foster unity. The ruling Congress party always watched such developments closely and manipulated the key players as required.

Soon, fissures appeared, with each faction suspecting the commitment of the other. Khobragade issued a public statement against Gavai on 3 November 1972. He accused Gavai of coming under the influence of Congress party and hence not being credible enough to be part of the process of reunification. The promises of unity publicly made on 1 November faded away in just two days. Leaders of both the factions weren't bothered about the plight of the youths who had risked their lives by throwing themselves in front of the prime minister's convoy.

Increasing support for Dalit Panthers

The increasing support for the Dalit Panther had sent chills down the spines of veteran Republican leaders. They became worried about their political existence. They could not openly oppose us because that would have invited the wrath of the people. Hence, they came up with the idea of deceiving people into believing that the various factions of the Republican Party of India were coming together.

They utilized the anniversary of the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism to put up a show of unity. The Buddhist Society of India and the Anyay Atyachar Nivaran Kruti Samiti (Committee to Redress Injustice and Atrocities) held a public meeting at Chaityabhoomi. Ghanshyam Talwatkar, who presided over the meeting, said that atrocities on Dalits would be countered from that day on by strong "tit for tat" measures. The meeting adopted a resolution to stage demonstrations during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit to Mumbai on 2 November 1972.

Speaking at the meeting, former MP G.K. Mane criticized the government and pointed out that at the same venue, Yeshwantrao Chavan, former chief minister of Maharashtra, had sought the support of the Republican Party of India to promote social harmony. He added that there was bitterness and disharmony instead, proving that the Congress party had cheated Dalits. Several speakers supported Mane's view and advocated unity among all factions. Those who addressed the gathering included Sumantrao Gaikwad, R.G. Kharat, R.G. Ruke, Prof Ramakant Yadav, Haribhau Pagare and Bajirao Kamble.

Unification of all factions was an uphill task, so they wanted to at least bring together two factions. The meeting resulted in the setting up of a three-member committee comprising Ghanshyam Talwatkar, Justice R.R. Bhole and P.T. Borale.

Saluting the Victory Pillar

The new year of all Dalit organizations begins on January 1 by saluting the Victory Pillar erected at Bhima Koregaon. The pillar is the lighthouse of the valour of Dalits. The pillar is the memorial for the brave Dalit soldiers who brought an end to the rule of the Peshwas – who used to make Dalits go around with pots hanging from their necks and brooms hanging from behind their backs. The earthen pots were meant to carry the spit of the Dalits while the brooms erased their footprints – to prevent the Untouchables from polluting the earth and other people. Dr Ambedkar had visited the memorial on several occasions to pay tribute.

As the Dalit Panther was a militant organization of youths, we wanted to salute the soldiers who had bravely fought against the Peshwa army. The first day of the year 1973 was our first opportunity as an organization to remember this victory. We visited Bhima Koregaon on that day. Dhasal had arrived in Pune on 1 December 1972 and together with the Pune unit mobilized hundreds of youths for the purpose.

I joined a team of several youths to travel to Pune from Mumbai and then onwards to Bhima Koregaon. I had instructed our boys to wear headbands with "Dalit Panther" written on them so that others knew who we were. When we reached the memorial, representatives of several other organizations had already gathered at the spot.

Dhasal and I were the main speakers at the gathering near the pillar. Among the others who spoke on the occasion were Kamble, Gaikwad, Bhosale, Kharat, Thaksen Padle and B.N. Bhalerao. Around five hundred youths joined us on the occasion. We held a public meeting at Yerwada. Supporters of Republican leaders tried to disrupt it, but our alert boys foiled their plan.

A riot at Igatpuri

On our return from Pune after paying tribute at the war memorial in Bhima Koregaon, the Bouddha Yuvak Sanghatana, an organization representing Buddhist youths in Nashik, asked me whether we could hold a meeting of the Dalit Panther in Nashik. Sanghsen Ahire of the Sanghatana had been in touch with me. He used to write me letters with a red-ink ballpoint pen. Ahire was a pro-communist activist and his camaraderie was a part of the strategy of the communist party to augment relations with Dalit youths. Ahire and his party had no mass support in Nashik, but when he persisted, we agreed to address four meetings on 7 January 1973 in localities spread across Deolali, Nashik Road and Nashik city.

The meetings were well publicized. Two of our activists, Vasant Bachhav and Anant Bachhav, hailed from Nashik. Besides, our branches were operational in those areas of Mumbai, like Matunga Labour Camp, Raoli Camp, Wadala Saltpans, Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar (Ghatkopar), Siddharth Colony (Chembur), Bouddha Colony (Kurla) and Gautam Nagar (Mulund), where people with roots in Nashik had settled. A large number of youths from these localities, apart from our activists from Saat Rasta, Siddharth Nagar, Dhor Chawl and Khar, agreed to travel to Nashik.

We had to travel overnight from the Victoria Terminus (Mumbai) to Nashik by the Manmad Passenger train. When I reached the railway station, I found hundreds of youths already waiting for me. Also, a large number of youths boarded the train at Dadar, Kurla and Thane stations. There was around four thousand of us. I was travelling to Nashik for the first time. There were some youths from the Konkan region who were travelling long distance by train for the first time – there was no rail service to Konkan those days. They

were pleasantly surprised at how comfortable a rail journey was, with toilets in the coaches. They were afraid of getting lost and never strayed too far from me.

When the train stopped at Igatpuri station, some youths stepped out on the platform for tea and snacks. Vendors selling tea and foodstuff made brisk business with so many customers demanding more. Some youths preferred to sit inside the train and have tea. Demand exceeded supply to such an extent that vendors couldn't handle it. There was much confusion. Tempers flared due to delays in returning empty cups. A cup might have been broken or a cup of tea might not have been paid for. But it was when our boys started shouting "Dalit Panther Zindabad" that the vendors became aggressive. The vendors threatened to take revenge.

Early in the morning, we reached Deolali railway station and all of us alighted, shouting slogans. An unusual sight, which indicated that a message had been flashed from Igatpuri, was a posse of ticket collectors waiting at the exits to check our tickets. However, the crowd was so huge that it was impossible to form a queue. Our boys chose to exit by shouting slogans, ignoring the ticket checking staff. At one place, when a ticket collector refused to yield, one of our activists, Waghmare, from Sewree, who was tall and well built, picked up the ticket collector and moved him out of the way. This made our boys shout slogans even more loudly as they exited the station.

Since there were four public meetings and the main speakers were from Mumbai, we decided that after delivering one's speech, each speaker should move on to the next venue to save time. I had asked Namdeo Dhasal to head to Nashik directly from Pune. He was there with Thaksen Padle. The main attraction was obviously Raja Dhale and our meetings drew large crowds. It was cold but our anger against atrocities had revved up our minds, especially when we realized that Nashik was where Dr Ambedkar and his supporters had been denied entry into the famous Kalaram temple because they were Dalits. Dr Ambedkar's agitiation to gain entry into the Kalaram temple had lasted from 1930 to 1935, but in vain.

Our visit was a grand success. Chandrashekhar Kale from the

Motha Rajwada area played a crucial role in organizing our meetings, in which Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar, Vithhal Sathe and I spoke. In one of his speeches, Dhale said that a person was free to pick his family deity and teacher and that Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had chosen Gautam Buddha over Karl Marx, because Buddha had gone beyond the philosophy of Marx, long before the latter's birth. After the meeting, Dhasal and Padle left for Pune, some youths went to visit their native villages in Nashik district, and the rest of us boarded the Manmad-Mumbai Passenger train.

We had no idea that some hooligans would be waiting for us at Igatpuri. They must have planned it, for our train was stopped before it entered the Igatpuri station. Before we could realize what was happening, a mob armed with sticks and knives barged into the train and attacked us. Some even carried guns to intimidate us. They probably felt that the Dalit Panther had challenged their hegemony in the stations on this route. The railway staff appeared to be in collusion with the attackers. We fought back, but since they were armed, most of us were left injured and bleeding.

The train stopped at Igatpuri and got delayed. After the train started moving it was stopped yet again and another mob of attackers entered the compartment to attack us. After about half an hour, they escaped under the cover of darkness. The riot led to the arrest of 163 Dalit Panthers and 37 vendors. Those arrested included Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare and Bhaskar Ambavade. I continued with my journey towards Mumbai with the remaining youths who were mostly government employees worried about being branded as criminals in police records. When we alighted from the train at Kalyan station, the railway police picked us up. However, the station couldn't accommodate hundreds of Panthers. They came up with the idea of arresting me as the representative of Panthers and that is what they did. The news of my arrest spread to the nearby Kolsewadi locality where Dalits lived, and I was released on bail.

Several newspapers published news about the riot. The *Maharashtra Times* mocked us by stating that the Batatawada had harmed us. I wrote a clarification and sent it to the newspaper, but

it wasn't published. The riot created an impression that the Dalit Panther was an organization like the Shiv Sena that indulged in hooliganism and loot. When I reached Mumbai, I was told that my wife had given birth to a baby girl. She was born on 8 January 1973. Our doctor had told me when the baby would most probably be delivered, but I had to go to Nashik. When we were fending off the attackers in Igatpuri, my wife was in labour. I named my daughter Angela after Angela Davis, the Black Panther leader who was imprisoned in the United States. The news about the naming of my daughter after Angela Davis had even reached the US. The American Broadcasting Corporation aired my interview. Gail Omvedt, eminent writer on the Dalit movement, had not settled in India yet but was keenly watching the developments while writing on the Dalit Panther and the Black Panther.

Another scholar, Althia Jones, arrived in Mumbai to study our organization. She came to my office and we went to the Taj Hotel where she was staying. I had seen the luxury hotel only from the outside all these years. She took me on a tour of the hotel premises. I was talking to her in my Indian English and was not able to understand most of her English because of her accent. However, I figured what she wanted. I wrote a piece on Dalit Panther, "Beyond Friendship", in Marathi and handed it to her. She said that she would get it translated into English. She gave me some literature that I have preserved to date.

The report in *Maharashtra Times* mocking us made Raja Dhale quit his job. He was an employee of the central government but he had become irregular at work because of his tours and public engagements. He did not resign, but was eventually let go. Dhasal was unemployed while Sangare did not have a regular job. Subsequently, the Bombay Port Trust employed Sangare. Mahatekar and I were bank employees. Now, Dhale was free to undertake tours and work for the organization fulltime. Since I used to correspond with people, I would organize most of the public meetings in different parts of Maharashtra. I requested Dhasal to move out from Pune so that he could travel through rural Maharashtra. He started accompanying Dhale. At times, Sangare or Mahatekar or Am-

bavade or I used to accompany Dhale on tours. Sometimes, after returning from tours with Dhale, Dhasal would complain that Dhale treated him like a servant and never gave him money. I told him that Dhale was not a rich man and that the organizers of functions did not take care of the expenses of the speakers well. Whenever I asked Dhasal to accompany Dhale, he would insist on being paid a certain sum. Initially, I used to bear the expenses, but his demands went on increasing until I could not afford to pay him any more. Once, after returning from a public meeting at Buldhana, Dhasal and Sangare told me that they would not accompany Dhale any more. The rift between Dhale and Dhasal was increasing.

The police department as well as the newspapers narrated the story that the riot at Igatpuri had stemmed from the hooliganism of our boys who did not pay for their tea and snacks at the railway station. The police report stated that the Bouddha Yuvak Sanghatana had organized public meetings in Nashik on 7 January 1973. While returning from the meetings, the report went on, the youths had tea and snacks at the Igatpuri railway station but they did not pay the vendors. The report said that our boys attacked the vendors and ransacked their shops. This report, which was faithfully reproduced by the newspapers, was false. Missing from the report was how our train had been stopped twice near the Igatpuri railway station and how armed mobs attacked us. The police as well as the press were unanimous in condemning us – manifesting a long tradition of suppressing us.

There was another important development in the aftermath of the Igatpuri riots. One of the main leaders from Nashik in the Ambedkarite movement, Shantabai Dani, initially stood bail for our boys. Subsequently, she started becoming annoyed with the boys' absence from the court hearings. Many of the boys were finding it difficult to manage their government jobs and the hearings. The real reason for Dani's annoyance though was that she belonged to one of the factions of the Republican Party of India and the Dalit Panther was overshadowing all the RPI factions. She ultimately cancelled her surety and we had to find an alternative. Rahibai Nikam and Vasant Gaware stepped in.

After the Igatpuri riot, the Dalit Panther reached the kitchens. Many women in Igatpuri cooked food for the 163 undertrials. During the agitation in Mahad in 1927 for the Untouchables' access to water, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had said that only those movements in which women participate, succeed. We were experiencing this truth. The women who were cooking food for the youths had realized that the Dalit Panther had to be nurtured to build up a movement against caste atrocities. It was a lesson for us: Shantabai Dani who was an eminent Republican leader had got cold feet because of her political interests, while common women were doing their bit by cooking food for the Dalit Panthers.

The morale of our boys was very high. Those who had fought the hooligans in Igatpuri also took on the ruffians who used to harass railway commuters travelling between Pimpri-Chinchwad and Talegaon. Once, they came face to face with our boys who were returning from a public meeting in Pune. They were armed, but our unarmed boys still managed to put an end to their reign of terror. Commuters started thanking the Dalit Panther for their safety from then on.

After Igatpuri riot

The Dalit Panther started gaining strength in northern Maharashtra and Nagpur regions after the riot in Igatpuri on 8 January 1973. We held two public meetings, one in Manmad on 18 January and the other in Jalgaon on 20 January, to set up our units. While addressing these meetings, the mention of the Hindu holy texts as the origin of caste system and caste atrocities was inevitable. Our speakers used to warn that if doctrines of Hindu scriptures continued to fuel atrocities against Dalits, we would demand a separate country – Dalitstan – for us. However, while relaying information about these events, the intelligence department of the police behaved like the protectors of Hindus. The intelligence agencies gave importance only to the burning of holy texts and the demand for Dalitstan in their reports, thereby creating prejudice against the Dalit Panther. They tried to create an impression that we were disturbing social peace and harmony. The Mumbai police may have issued a diktat to the effect. The demonization continued irrespective of whether it was Raja Dhale or someone else addressing the meetings. The newspapers, too, faithfully endorsed the claim of the police.

Aurangabad is an important city, educationally and culturally for Dalits. It is the main city of the Marathwada region. It was where Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had set up Milind College, where thousands of students, even those from Vidarbha region, were getting an education. The scholarship being given to the students was inadequate and the Yuvak Kranti Dal had taken up the issue. The agitation was right but was being fought on the wrong battlefield.

The leader of the Yuvak Kranti Dal, Dr Kumar Saptarshi, chose to launch the agitation at the college run by the Peoples' Education Society set up by Dr Ambedkar, instead of taking it to the doorstep of the state government. The reason might have been that the students were frustrated and he got a "readymade mob". Since the agitation was taken up against the Peoples' Education Society, we decided to organize a counter-protest to protect the institution, in the interest of students. The Republican Students' Federation was already involved in a counter-agitation, so we supported them. Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal joined the counter-protest on 23 January 1973. Our counter-protest drew most of the students who were poor and had travelled far from their homes to get higher education. This led to new branches of the Dalit Panther being opened in various places in Maharashtra, some even without our permission.

Along with Aurangabad, Nagpur was an important city. It was the headquarters of the right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and also the bastion of Republican leader Rajabhau Khobragade. Khobragade belonged to Chandrapur, but his followers and political activities were based in Nagpur. When Ramdas Narnavre from Erangaon, in Nagpur district, was sacrificed as "instructed" by the goddess and Dhale's article in *Saadhanaa* had created unrest, Khobragade had held a public meeting on 2 September 1972 at Kamal Chowk, Nagpur. The public meeting was well attended and youths expected him to demand strong action against those who had killed Narnavre. However, Khobragade remained silent on the issue and only discussed politics. In fact, Khobragade, after failing to make it to the Rajya Sabha – the upper house of Parliament – was expected to take on the government. He did not. Local youths became disillusioned with these Republican leaders heading different factions and began supporting the Dalit Panther. In Nagpur, there were militant youths like Ranjit Meshram, who had incurred the wrath of the RSS for burning the effigy of Ram instead of Ravana's.

On 8 February 1973, a public meeting was held near Kamal Chowk. Suryakant Dongre, a lawyer and a loyal supporter of Khobragade, presided over the meeting. The youths attending the meet-

ing unanimously decided to open a branch of the Dalit Panther. Among them were local leaders like Bhimrao Naik, Prakash Ramteke, Tuka Koche, Padmakar Borkar, Madhukar Lade, Ashok Borkar, Baban Lavhatre, Baban Kathane, Baban Bansod, Govind Waghmare, Ramchandra Khandekar, Manohar Raut, Harish Vanjari, Atish Ganvir, Suresh Waghmare, Saroj Meshram Suresh Ghate, Thomas Kamble, Bhupesh Thulkar and Ramnesh Dhole. Bhiwaji Badage was appointed Nagpur city chief, while Prakash Ramteke was appointed secretary and Bhimrao Naik the defence minister. Baban Lavhatre began as the vice-president, but was later promoted to the Maharashtra-level committee. Lawyers K.V. Umare and Baban Bansod were helping the Nagpur unit of the Dalit Panther.

In Vidarbha region, we promoted Ambedkarism with a special focus on eradicating sub-castes, which had created strong divisions among the local people. The youths in Vidarbha were militant but were unable to transcend the barriers of sub-castes. Everything used to be seen from the sub-caste angle. We did away with that attitude and brought them together, warning against nurturing such divisions. Youths, not just in Nagpur but the entire Vidarbha region, became free from the shackles of sub-castes. Unfortunately, we could not break the barriers of castes.

Within a short period, the fear of the Dalit Panthers got instilled in the minds of the people who thought of the Dalits as meek and gullible. Even established goons would tremble whenever they heard the words "Dalit Panther". It was a miracle of sorts. The local police, who were hand in glove with the criminals when it came to atrocities against Dalits, had to mend their ways in view of the rise of the Dalit Panther. We thus won the goodwill of the common man who had nothing to do with the organization. The news reached the villages, where its humble residents saw a ray of hope in us.

Three cases from Mumbai

The Dalit Panther demonstrated this alchemy in several places, but I will cite three instances from Mumbai: one that took place at Chembur, one of the eastern suburbs; the other at Khar, one of the western suburbs; and the third at Tardeo, in the main island city.

In Mumbai, there were slums and slumlords. There was a nexus between the slumlords and the local police. These slumlords used to indulge in criminal and anti-social activities and be shielded by corrupt police officials.

There was a road leading from Chembur railway station (West) to Ramabai Nagar via Pestam Sagar. A country-liquor bar belonging to a Maharashtrian named Waikul was located on this road. People returning from a hard day's work used to patronize the bar. Waikul, however, used to fleece his customers and was involved in many immoral activities. Once, under the cover of darkness, he tried to molest two Dalit women walking along that road. He knew that the local police would not touch him because he used to bribe them. The women raised an alarm but could not do anything more. Approaching the police station to file a case against Waikul was like being branded as a criminal by the police.

Dadabhau Salve brought this molestation case to my notice. The incident had taken place in 1973, when Dalit Panthers and Shiv Sena activists were perpetually at war with each other, fighting street battles. The local police in Mumbai used to behave as if they belonged to the Shiv Sena. While we were always at the receiving end of the brunt of police action and put behind bars, the Shiv Sena activists got a freehand. Whenever there was a riot, I would be told

and I used to rush to the police station concerned. Before leaving, I used to inform the Special Branch I, CID, and Ingle, who would inform officials of the police station concerned in advance. Officials like DCP Balchandra from Special Branch CID, ACP Mokashi, Inspector Nadkarni, Inspector Dikshit, PSI Pagare and head constable Sawant knew me very well.

I met ACP Mokashi and narrated the incident to him. He ordered an investigation and ultimately the Chembur police had no option but to arrest Waikul. I tried to ensure that the arrest was not just a formality – not just one on paper – but led to Waikul spending a sleepless night in custody in the company of bugs. For Waikul, it was an unexpected incident. The officials of the Tilak Nagar police station in Chembur, who used to hobnob with Waikul, had to arrest him because ACP Mokashi had warned them that if they failed to arrest him, it would lead to a communal riot. Waikul's arrest boosted the morale of our youths and brought in free publicity for the Dalit Panther. Dalit youths, not just in Chembur, but across the eastern suburbs of Mumbai, like Ghatkopar, Mulund and Bhandup, contacted me with requests of opening branches of our organization in their localities.

Another incident took place in the Teen Bangla slum area in Khar, where a slumlord named Ramaswamy used to rule the roost. He was involved in many illegal activities, while his wife used to run his illicit liquor den. The couple used to intimidate local slum-dwellers with the backing of the local police. One of our activists, Prakash Elinje, lived in the slum. He was a Class IV employee in the municipal corporation and used to compose songs in praise of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and sing them in his spare time. His mother used to sell vegetables to augment family income.

One day, Ramaswamy molested a local woman. When Elinje came to know of the incident, he rushed to my office at Charni Road and requested me to intervene. I agreed and boarded a bus plying the route No 65 to reach the police commissioner's office. Officials of the special branch who were acquainted with me were on duty. They called up the local police and ordered the arrest of Ramaswamy, with a warning that any delay would result in a com-

munal riot. The local police had no other option but to obey the orders. When Ramaswamy was arrested, the news spread like wildfire.

When I got back home, his wife, Amma, was waiting for me. She had already found out about me. She was accompanied by three women, one of them carrying an infant. Amma requested me to withdraw the complaint against her husband. I told her about her husband's crime and asked her whether she approved of all his actions. When I remained firm on my decision, she started crying. I made her realize that her husband was a villain who deserved to be severely punished. She was disappointed and went away to Khar, wailing loudly. Subsequently, I came to know that Ramaswamy had merely been taken to the police station and that he was even allowed to sit on a chair. I immediately contacted the officials and warned them that if the slumlord was not put behind bars, our organization would hold a protest in front of the police station. They promptly called up the local police and Ramaswamy was sent to custody.

The same night, around 10pm, five taxies stoped in front of my house and Ramaswamy's men came to meet me. They were ruffians but spoke to me politely, asking me to intervene and release Anna (Ramaswamy). They said that I should help them get Anna out of police custody at once. I did not have a telephone at home and told them that I would think over it in the morning. I wanted Anna to remain in custody at least for a night. Some of them offered me money and jewellery. It was an opportunity for me to earn lot of money, but my conscience did not permit it. Such an act would have also tarnished my image in the eyes of senior police officials as well as the people for whom I was fighting. I refused to fall in line. I did nothing for Anna even the next day.

Two days later, when Anna was released on bail, he had lost his earlier arrogance and was finding it difficult to face local people. I was told that he respected me for not compromising my principles by refusing to take money from his cronies. From then on, whenever I ran into them in their area, Anna and Amma used to talk to me politely and offer me their hospitality. I stuck to my principles

and was pleased that a criminal like Anna was helpless in front of a man with a strong moral character. The best outcome was that Anna never molested women again.

The third case pertained to the slum area near the Usha Kiran building, which was known as the tallest building in Mumbai. The slum locality was known as M.P. Mills Compound. One day, seven goons raped a woman who worked as a housemaid in one of the flats of the building. She was returning home after her day's work, when they pounced on her, took her to another slum named Sakdewadi and raped her. The incident took place on 20 January 1973. She sustained injuries. With the help of the people in the neighbourhood, she filed a complaint for assault. She could not muster up the courage to file a rape complaint. She was a single mother and used to live with her children. She feared the worst because the perpetrators of the crime were known criminals. The prime accused, Sunil More, was a henchman of local corporator Prabhakar Nikalankar and Shiv Sena's divisional head Jagannath Kadam. The slum-dwellers feared the goons because of their political connections.

Our activists, Dhanaji Ranpise, Maruti Sonawane, Tanaji Kamble and D.N. Sansare, were living in the area and Sonawane approached me. I told him that the culprits had to be booked for rape, not just physical assault. The local police refused to amend the complaint, but when we told them that she was hesitating because of the social stigma attached to rape, they said she could file a written complaint and sign off with her thumb impression.

Avinash Mahatekar and I rushed to meet her at Nair Hospital, where she was being treated for her injuries. She was finding it difficult to sit up and narrate the incident because of her injuries. I asked her the relevant questions and Avinash drafted the complaint. We obtained her thumb impression and went to the Gamdevi police station. We insisted that the case of assault be converted into a case of assault and rape. We asked the officials to arrange for a medical checkup of the victim, but they said that it would be futile because it had already been more than 24 hours since the incident. We insisted, and then a police sub-inspector and a constable accompanied

us to the hospital, where they spoke to victim in private to ascertain the truth. She told them what she had told us. She was then sent for medical examination. I heaved a sigh of relief.

We held a meeting of Dalit Panthers in M.P. Mills Compound on 22 January 1973. The rapists were still at large. Several speakers lambasted the police for their inability to nab the criminals. One of us, Ramesh Sakpal, pointed out that the police acted swiftly in such cases only if the victim belonged to the upper castes, but if the victims were poor or Dalits, they did nothing. I wrote a letter to the police demanding that the accused be booked for rape. I also issued a press release, giving the police two days to arrest the goons, failing which I warned that the Dalit Panthers would take law into their own hands. I also added that the police were deliberately ignoring the case because the victim was a Buddhist. Some newspapers published the press release, but the *Maharashtra Times* noted that the victim first filed a case of assault and then later included rape, thereby raising suspicion on the statement of the victim. It was a perfect example of how the media protects the police and the system.

We knew the consequences of taking law into our own hands but something had to be done. I sent a message to our activists in the area to hold a protest march very soon. The message was pasted on a noticeboard in the locality and the police came to know about it too. Before we could take out our march, all the seven suspects were arrested. Later, they were released on bail, but they were kept away from the locality.

In due course, the case came up for hearing, but fearing uncomfortable questions in the court, the victim preferred to remain absent. She left the locality to settle elsewhere. The police, on the other hand, made no effort to trace her and ensure that the case reached a logical end. Our activists, too, were unable to trace her and I regret it to date that we failed in ensuring punishment for the rapists. The woman, whom I would not like to name, became a victim of this patriarchal society, insecurity and a lack of sensitivity.

Our intervention in the case created an atmosphere of security for the women in the locality. The local people saw that the Dalit

Panther was not like other organizations, but that it was committed to work for their welfare and security. The rapists had the support of Shiv Sena leaders. Still, we were able to pressurize the police into arresting them. That was our victory.

A few questions haunt me. What happened to the victim? Did she carry the stigma for the whole of her life? Did her children suffer because of the stigma attached to rape? Did she commit suicide? Is the issue confined only to such victims or is it a wider issue of our patriarchal society?

First burning of the *Gita*

In public meetings, Dalit Panthers were not only speaking against the religious texts that were the origin of caste atrocities but also threatening to publicly burn such holy books in protest. The venue for the public "bonfire" that we had announced was Shivaji Park. This was where the Shiv Sena used to hold its rallies. The Dalit Panther's going public with its stand on religious texts coincided with the municipal elections in Mumbai in which the Republican Party of India was supporting the Shiv Sena. We had already announced our boycott, prompting the intelligence and law enforcement agencies to sit up and take note. Raja Dhale had already angered the Shiv Sena by quoting Dr Ambedkar at a public meeting in Goregaon, Mumbai, saying that the *Gita* was a book of idiocy written by a cowherd. Shiv Sena chief Balasaheb Thackeray had taken offence and declared that his party would not tolerate any disrespect towards the holy texts of Hindus. Dalit Panthers accepted the challenge, putting Thackeray in a quandary, because his party was counting on RPI support and he had to soft-pedal the issue for political gains.

On 6 March 1973, we held a public meeting in the open space opposite Lalit Kala Bhavan, Naigaon, Mumbai, to urge everyone to boycott the elections. I had sent a telegram to Namdeo Dhasal, who was in Pune, asking him to be present at the burning of the *Gita* in Shivaji Park – which was to be held at the end of a march from Naigaon. I was expecting Dhasal to reach Naigaon for the meeting, but he did not turn up. Dhale, Bhai Sangare and I spoke at the meeting on the issue of burning the holy texts of Hindus. The

meeting concluded around 11pm and we embarked on our mission. Intelligence Officer Ingle and local Inspector Chingu Lingu (C.L.) Patil were present at the meeting and were anxious about our next step. Ingle asked me about it but I did not tell him the truth even though we knew each other well. I told him that we were all going to Chaityabhoomi, Dadar. Patil also asked me and I gave him the same reply. To convince them, I publicly asked the crowd to march towards Chaityabhoomi. Some youths were annoyed with my announcement and questioned the plan of visiting Chaityabhoomi at that hour, pointing out that they would not get any transport to go home. "Whoever wants to go home has the freedom to do so," I told them. An inspector of Bhoiwada Police Station, Gupte, also approached me and I told him that we were going to Chaityabhoomi. He said something on his walkie-talkie that we couldn't understand. Perhaps, the officials had anticipated our march to Shivaji Park to burn the *Gita*.

About 500 youths started marching on the Tilak Bridge towards Dadar (West) where both Chaityabhoomi as well as Shivaji Park were located. When we passed an election meeting of the Shiv Sena being addressed by senior leader Manohar Joshi, our youths shouted slogans against the Shiv Sena and hailed the Dalit Panther. The gathering did not react. Around midnight we reached Shivaji Park, where we found a posse of police personnel ready for a fight. The zonal DCP and ACP of F Division were at the forefront and behind them was a human chain of police personnel with lathis, helmets and other combat gear. The situation was tense and anything could have happened.

I delivered a short introductory speech, after which Dhale took over. He asked the crowd whether they were aware of the purpose of the gathering. The enthusiastic crowds shouted in the affirmative. Dhale then delivered a small speech elaborating on the need to burn the *Gita*. In fact, we had been talking about the issue from October 1972 to March 1973 on several occasions and the Dalit Panther had already published a small booklet on Dr Ambedkar's views on Hinduism. The booklet was based on an interview of Dr Ambedkar published in the weekly *Maibhoomi* around 33 years

earlier. Our members had already read the booklet. Dhale fished out a copy of the *Gita* from his pocket and Sathe gave him a matchbox. Dhale set the *Gita* on fire.

The police personnel were now expecting it and immediately pounced on Dhale and snatched the half-burnt *Gita*. The police columns moved swiftly. They made a human chain around us, picked us up and pushed us into the waiting police vans. The vans were immediately driven away, some to Mahim Police Station, others to Matunga, Jacob Circle, Bhoiwada and Palton Road. I was in the van that headed to the Mahim police station. Once again, Inspector Ingle did not include my name in the list of protestors to allow me to arrange for the release of others – even though I had not taken him into confidence. I visited all the police stations where our boys were held in custody. The police had arrested 264 youths. Dhale was happy that he had finally succeeded in publicly burning a copy of the *Gita*, while I was happy that the confrontation had not gotten out of hand.

The next day, newspapers carried the story of the public burning of the *Gita*. The intelligence department, as usual, fed reporters with the slanted story that Dhale had indulged in communal hatred, had denied that the *Gita* was a holy text and tried to burn the *Gita*. The reports stated that the police had foiled the attempt to publicly burn the *Gita* and arrested 264 youths. Since Dhasal was not present, the newspapers said Dhale and Sathe were the leaders of the mob. Since it was a late night development, the stories were brief, but the media had taken note of the incident.

When I went around meeting the youths in police custody, they heaped their demands on me. Apart from foodstuff, some of them demanded cigarettes and bidis of the brands they liked and I had no option but to get them. Inspector Gupte had filed the First Information Report of the incident (No 112/73), in which the 264 accused were charged under sections 295 (A) (outraging religious feelings), 153(A) (promoting enmity on grounds of religion) and 34 (acting with common intention) of the Indian Penal Code. I was entrusted with the task of getting the youths released on bail. Whenever I met the youths in custody, they would demand imme-

diate release and at times, threaten me with dire consequences if I failed to do so. I was also bogged down with the formalities of arranging for the bail, which included court fee stamps of Rs 2 per bail application. Finally, after four days, I managed to get them out on bail.

The case later came up for hearing in the Bandra court. The courtroom was not large enough to accommodate all of the accused, yet an order was issued saying that all must remain present. I used to attend each and every hearing because the lawyers would demand their fees. I used to collect Re 1 from each of the youths and pay at least Rs 100 to the lawyer. For those who could not attend, I used to issue a statement to keep them up to date.

Months after we announced our intent to burn the *Gita*, we had finally been able to do it. It was a symbolic act to protest against the religious diktats that brought untold suffering to Dalits. Incidentally, in courts, people testifying before a judge have to swear by the *Gita* and affirm that they would speak the truth. Our colleagues like Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar, who used to roar from public platforms against the *Gita*, chose to stay away when their turn came. Dhasal was away in Pune.

Our first poll boycott: March 1973

Elections are inevitable in a democracy in which political parties capture power or keep in check those in power. In Maharashtra, the political players were the Congress party, Peasants and Workers' Party (PWP), Jana Sangh, Communists, Socialists and the Republicans. Among them, the Congress and the PWP were the major players, with the Congress occupying the treasury benches and the PWP in the opposition. In 1957, the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti (which fought for integration of Mumbai into Maharashtra when the former Bombay province was bifurcated to form Maharashtra and Gujarat states) changed the political atmosphere and the Republican Party of India became the main opposition party. In the 1962 polls, the equations changed when the Samiti fragmented and the PWP became the main opposition party. The other opposition parties were the socialists and the communists. The Jana Sangh lacked strength. In 1966, the then chief minister, Vasantrao Naik, covertly helped Bal Thackeray in forming the Shiv Sena, which made critics brand the Sena as "Vasant Sena". Though its motto was to fight for the rights of the Marathi people, the Shiv Sena indulged in activities like foiling industrial strikes by Marathi workers.

The Shiv Sena said it found civic amenities lacking in Mumbai city and announced that it would contesting the municipal polls scheduled for 9 March 1973. This was an about-turn from the public outbursts of the supremo, Thackeray, saying that for the Shiv Sena, politics was like the "gajkaran" (ringworm) that had to be avoided. The Dalit Panther had already resolved not to enter poli-

tics. Since political parties contested elections on caste considerations and we were against casteism, we had made up our minds to not enter the fray. This was the Dalit Panther's first boycott of elections since its inception in 1972. I had issued a public statement pointing out that casteist and religious considerations had made a mockery of democracy and hence the Dalit Panther would boycott the elections.

Many organizations welcomed our stand. Some even joined us on the sidelines. For instance, the Matang community boycotted the polls after Abasaheb Ballal, the leader of the Matang Aikya Samiti, issued an appeal. The Congress party felt the brunt of the impact of this boycott and many Shiv Sena candidates were elected. We could not get enough support among Dalits because the veteran Republican leaders had sold out. However, Dalit youths supported us in large numbers. Two Republican candidates were elected.

One of the Republican factions had supported the Shiv Sena and was annoyed with our appeal for boycott. Its leaders launched a smear campaign against us, arguing that calling for a boycott was against the principles of Dr Ambedkar, who had empowered every citizen through universal franchise. We remained firm on our stand and at a public meeting in Khar on 14 February 1973, Raja Dhale urged people to shun the sinister Republican-Shiv Sena alliance because helping it would amount to nurturing the Hindutva ideology.

The experience of the Republican-Shiv Sena alliance was similar to that of the Republican-Congress alliance. While Republican voters supported Shiv Sena candidates, the Shiv Sena voters did not reciprocate for Republican candidates. It led to a lot of whining in the Republican camp and finally, Thackeray appointed one of the Republican leaders Sumantrao Gaikwad to the civic body and also made him a member of the BEST (Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) Committee that ran the bus service in Mumbai. Sumantrao gained recognition and an official car.

First protest march

We had launched the Dalit Panther as a social organization, but after we boycotted the municipal corporation elections in Mumbai, some people saw us as a potent political force, too. The reason was that many Republican candidates had to face defeat and these people attributed this debacle to our boycott. We wanted to reiterate our stand on and our commitment to social causes. At one of our monthly meetings held in Siddharth Nagar, Baptist Road, on 15 July 1973, we decided to take out a protest march to the Vidhan Bhavan on 14 August. Raja Dhale presided over the meeting. Apart from me, those who were present included Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar, Vithalrao Sathe, Kisan Phulpagar, Arjun Jagtap, Rangnath Kadam, Narayan Manjrekar and Vasant Bachchav. We divided tasks among ourselves: Sathe would do posters, Machhindra Kamble from Vikhroli would have banners and boards made and Sangare and I would draft a memorandum to the chief minister and circulate it among district presidents. We also discussed the details of issues to be included in the memorandum.

I wrote a letter to chief minister Vasantrao Naik's secretary B.G. Deshmukh on 16 July 1973 and submitted it at the chief minister's office. While our members from Mumbai and Thane were going to take part in the march to the Vidhan Bhavan, those in other districts were going to hold marches in their respective areas and submit a copy of memorandum to the district collector. We had to have the memorandum printed and delivered to our district presidents on time. Hence, on 24 July 1973, I wrote to Chandrashekhar Kale (Nashik), Namdeo Gaikwad (Igatpuri), Suresh Gaikwad (Dhule),

Suresh Sawant (Kasara), P.S. Rokade (Kalyan), Bhimrao Thul (Nagpur), Gangadhar Gade (Aurangabad) and Nandu Kamble (Sangli), urging them to start preparations. I also issued a statement for the newspapers.

Sangare was supposed to assist me in my work, but he was unable to do so. I prepared a memorandum single-handedly and had it printed. Sathe did his job well. He got a huge hoarding printed at a litho press in Ghatkopar. It was so big that even passengers in buses passing by could read it. Besides, posters were pasted at Sachivalaya, Vidhan Bhavan, railway stations and our localities. A panel was appointed under K.L. Thorat to create awareness in localities like Jairajbhai Lane, Arab Galli, BIT Chawls (Saat Rasta and Mumbai Central), Foras Road, Siddharth Nagar, Love Lane, Mahalaxmi Approach Road, Worli, Mayanagar, Mazgaon Khadda, Tardeo, Kach Karkhana and Delisle Road. Besides, there were more people for outreach in other localities, like Bhaskar Ambavad (Kurla Khachar, Sindhi Camp, Siddharth Colony, Ramabai Nagar, Govandi, Kurla Buddha Colony); Jayawantabai Jagdhane (Mulund, Vikhroli, Hariyali village, Bhandup); Bhimnath Jadhav (Naigaon, Sewri, Matunga and Sewri Labour Camps, Unis Kondha Quarry); and Das Dupate (Santa Cruz, Bandra, Khar). In all these localities, our members lived in large numbers. Elsewhere, our membership drive was picking up fast. For instance, in Goregaon, there were committed members like Narayan Gokhale and Vithal Lokhande. Likewise, there were activists like Surve and Chabukswar in Limboni Baug, Govandi.

We issued an internal circular, asking each unit to contribute at least Rs 50 for the march and hand it over to Mahatekar before 10 August. Everything was progressing as expected but we still held another meeting to work out the details. We took an important decision of standardizing slogans. The reason was that some of our members used to shout slogans as they liked. Some of them were even indecent. Mahatekar and I were given the task of writing standard slogans. We sat in a restaurant near Byculla market and finalized the slogans. Our units were asked to confine themselves to the authorized slogans.

These slogans were: 1. *Dalit Panther Zindabad* (Victory to the Dalit Panther). 2. *Krantiba Phulyancha Vijay Aso* (Victory to Phule, the father of revolution). 3. *Aanu Aanu Samateche Rajya Aanu* (We will usher in the rule of equality). 4. *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkarancha Vijay Aso* (Victory to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar) 5. *Dalitanchi Satta, Janatechi Satta* (Power to Dalits is power to the people). 6. *Gaadu Gaadu, Hindutvavaad Gaadu* (We'll bury the Hindutva ideology). 7. *Hum Us Deshke Dushman Hai, Jahan Nariki Izzat Khatreme Hai* (We are enemies of the country where the honour of women is in peril). 8. *Bol Dalita, Halla Bol* (Say O' Dalit, Say Attack) 9. *Laani Hai Laani Hai, Hame Azadi Laani Hai* (We have to bring in freedom). 10. *Is Deshka Kya Hai Naam, Bharat yaa Hindustan?* (What is the name of this country? Bharat or Hindustan?) 11. *Aamdaar Khaasdaar, Zamindaronki Aulad* (MLAs and MPs are the offspring of feudal landlords). 12. *Unhe Desh Bechna Hai, Hame Desh Bachana Hai* (They want to sell off the country, we have to save the country). 13. *Golila Dalit, Polila Bhat* (Dalit is being shot, Brahmin is being fed). 14. *Jithe Ghadto Erangaon Bavda, Tya Deshachya Chhatit Ravda* (The country where Erangaon Bawda takes place has to take the brunt in the chest). 15. *Jo Deshko Todate Hai, Usay Mahatma Kahate Hai* (One who breaks the country is hailed as a great soul). 16. *Nayi Roshni Layee Hai, Deshme Aaag Lagayee Hai* [She (Indira) has brought new light, set the country on fire). 17. *Utth Dalita Bhuka Kangal, Bandukila Haat Ghaal* (Rise O' impoverished, hungry Dalit, pick up the gun). 18. *Dalit Gulam Desh Gulam, Dalit Swatantra Desh Swatantra* (If the Dalit is a slave, the country is a slave; if the Dalit is free, the country is free). 19. *About-Turn, Mahar Battalion About-Turn* (About-turn Dalit soldiers, about-turn).

All the slogans were cyclostyled (duplicated) for distribution among select activists. A friend of one of our activists, Appasaheb Ranpise, was in the sorting section of the Railway Mail Service in Dadar. That made our distribution easy and prompt. The announcement of our march had raised expectations and many political parties were eagerly waiting for our grand show.

The march was scheduled to begin at 2pm. We would march to

the Vidhan Bhavan, where the state legislature would be in session. Our delegation would also meet the chief minister to discuss our demands. When I reached Azad Maidan around 1pm, a huge crowd had already gathered. More youths were pouring in. I had issued a public statement postponing the start of the march to 3pm, to ensure that latecomers did not miss it and they added to the numbers. I had expected a turnout of about 40,000 people.

I had reached the venue at 1pm because I knew that police personnel would be deployed well in advance. When I reached the spot, many youths gathered around me. Some policemen came towards us. One of them was a police inspector, who took me aside and asked me not to shout some objectionable slogans. He told me that one of the objectionable slogans was "About-Turn About-Turn, Mahar Battalion About-Turn". I refused to comply. He took me to a police vehicle nearby, where an assistant commissioner of police asked me to exclude the slogan about the Mahar Battalion because it amounted to sedition.

I explained to them why that particular slogan had made it to our list. Sadashiv Maruti Chandanshive, a soldier, was on leave. At his native Anklay village (in Jat tehsil), Sangli district, some villagers approached him for subsidized liquor available to army personnel. Chandanshive could not fulfill their demand. This infuriated the villagers so much that they assaulted him. When we came to know of the incident, Mahatekar and I issued a statement. It was published in the *Maharashtra Times* on 9 April 1973. We had warned that if a Buddhist soldier, who was staking his life for the country on the borders, was being attacked for liquor, guns of soldiers deployed on the frontiers would turn on the country.

I told the police personnel that our stand were justified as similar incidents were taking place, despite the fact that a Dalit soldier, Bhimu Kamble, continued to fight till he was decapitated. I pointed out that the wives and sisters of such soldiers were being subjected to caste atrocities. The assistant commissioner of police though had made up his mind that the slogan was provocative and had to be excluded. I reluctantly agreed, but I knew that since the list of slogans had already been circulated among the protestors, they would

be raised in the march.

The march began around 3pm and received an overwhelming response with groups of youths joining it even on its way to Vidhan Bhavan. Dhasal had visited several localities in the city to invite people to join it. He and Sangare were going around among the protestors, giving instructions and marshalling them. I told the protestors about the slogan on soldiers and asked them to exclude it. However, when I moved ahead, the youths raised the slogan. It was mob psychology at work. Around 4.30pm, the march reached Kala Ghoda, where it was stopped by the police. The march was peaceful unlike others during which the participants go on a rampage, stealing, looting and intimidating hawkers on the pavements. Our march also included a significant number of women led by Jayawantabai Jagdhane. When the police stopped us at the barricades, Dhale delivered a short speech, after which a delegation comprising Dhale, Dhasal, Sathe and me went to Vidhan Bhavan to meet the chief minister. Mahatekar and Sangare were asked to stay back with the protestors and to hold the fort till we returned. We took a long time as the chief minister wasn't free to meet us. His secretary, Deshmukh, had thrown up his hands despite confirmation of our appointment a month ago. We refused to budge and told Deshmukh that we would not leave without meeting the chief minister. Meanwhile, there was a downpour, but our protestors remained where they were because Sangare was speaking and they liked his rhetoric. Ultimately, the chief minister met us, accepted our memorandum and turned to go. We were annoyed. Sathe raised his voice, telling him that we had been waiting for him for such a long time and he had no time to discuss our demands. The chief minister stopped, sat himself on a chair and we began talking. The discussion lasted for about an hour. Perhaps, it was the longest discussion a chief minister had had with a delegation of protestors. We discussed each and every demand listed in our memorandum and for each one, he had typical answers like he would look into it or examine the issue or think over it.

After the discussion, we returned to Kala Ghoda, where the protestors were waiting for us. Dhasal briefed them and they dispersed.

I requested all to maintain discipline while returning home. All went away and only three of us – Sangare, Mahatekar and I – remained at Kala Ghoda. We were happy that the march went off well. While returning home in a bus, we got down at Tardeo Bus Depot and had tea at a Sindhi restaurant called Geeta Bhavan. Since newspaper reporters were present at Kala Ghoda, we were expecting good coverage. The next day, Mahatekar came to me fuming. Newspapers had covered the march, but had not included his name. His ire was particularly directed at *Nava Kaal*. He took a sheet of paper from me and wrote his resignation from the Dalit Panther executive committee. I tried to convince him, but in vain. I issued another statement on the march and included his name. The newspapers should have mentioned him as he had played a crucial role in controlling the protestors and I tried to convince him that I had nothing to do with the omission. He was convinced that I had no hand in it. Later, weeklies took note of our march and some, like *Sobat* published from Pune, bitterly criticized us. In the issue of *Sobat* dated 9 September 1973, Chandrakant Purandare, alias Kant Saswadkar, wrote in his column, "Chaupatiwarun", about our march. His comments irked us. I wrote a piece, rebutting his comments pointwise, and sent it to *Sobat* for publication. The weekly published it in its issue dated 16 September 1973. Later, the editor of the weekly G.V. Behre wrote an editorial in which he opined that my piece was balanced.

Our march had made an impact. The state government was forced to take note of the issues that we had raised. On the other hand, the Shiv Sena and Republican leadership had become insecure. Subsequently, there were analytical pieces in various publications praising our efforts. Sunil Dighe had written one such piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. However, it was apparent that he favoured the communist ideology and he tried to make a hero out of Dhasal. The author pulled out all the stops to project Dhasal and the organization from the communist point of view. It made Dhasal known in the Left circles and sowed seeds of division in our organization. The march of 14 August 1973 was thus significant.

Shankaracharya as 'Shoshakacharya'

The Dalit Panther was not only fighting to stop atrocities against Dalits but was also making efforts to prevent exploitation. To uproot the exploitative system, it is necessary to fight the tendency of people to exploit others. The Buddha said this over 2,500 years ago. We cannot eradicate suffering without first locating its origins. For thousands of years, the Untouchables were subjected to exploitation, injustice and atrocities. Its root cause was the inequality imbibed in the Varna system, which was nurtured by effective power centres and institutions like the four *peeths* (seats) of Shankaracharyas. The Shankaracharyas of the four *peeths* endorse inequality and justify caste system in their respective jurisdictions.

One such Shankaracharya from Jagannathpuri, Niranjan Teerth, once said that even if a cobbler became educated, he would still remain a cobbler and that an Untouchable would always remain an Untouchable. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution has outlawed untouchability, but it remains in the minds of the people. While justifying untouchability, the Shankaracharya claimed that nature had created inequality and he would insist on preserving it. His casteist outbursts should have triggered protests from the cobbler community. However, the *Charmakar* (cobbler) community, which is content doing its leather business, did not feel insulted. But this statement infuriated the Dalit Panther. On 18 March 1973, when the Shankaracharya was taking part in a procession on one of Kolhapur's main roads, some of our youths threw footwear at him in protest. That did not make any difference to him and he continued with his diatribe because he had to protect the tenets of Hinduism.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) assumed the responsibility of protecting Hinduism but could not see beyond the elite – those with fair complexion and blue eyes.

The Shankaracharya was scheduled to speak on 20 March 1973, at the Murlidhar temple, in Sangli. Our boys raised black flags and displayed banners that said "Shoshakacharya" – the teacher of exploiters – as he arrived at the venue They also shouted slogans condemning him and asking him to go back. Thanks to a large number of police personnel deployed at the venue, the scheduled programme went ahead. During his speech, the Shankaracharya said that he would stick to his views to the last drop of his blood and propagate them. He further said that socialists and communists would not be able to usher in equality materially because nature had made human beings unequal.

Meanwhile, Dr Kumar Saptarshi from Yuvak Kranti Dal, who was a crusader against inequality and used to visit villages to create awareness against casteism, decided to take on the Shankaracharya. He invited the Shankaracharya for a debate. The debate was scheduled for 29 March 1973, at Udyan Prasad Karyalay in Pune. The Shankaracharya began with a two-hour discourse on *Manusmriti* (the holy text which ordains the caste system and preaches caste-based and gender-based inequalities). He justified the diktats of *Manusmriti* and asked Saptarshi to tender a public apology. The crowd present at the venue was infuriated with Saptarshi. The crowd suspected that he had masterminded the footwear-throwing incident a few days earlier. They demanded his apology, quite clearly to ensure that the debate was cancelled and the Shankaracharya was saved from embarrassment of losing the debate. The audience comprised supporters of Shankaracharya who had been given special entry passes.

However, the much-publicized debate proved a damp squib and fizzled out. Even Saptarshi, perhaps realizing that he was taking on the religious head of his own religion, folded his hands in front of the Shankaracharya, bowed and submitted a memorandum. It was a clear-cut display of the Hindu mindset; Saptarshi couldn't become aggressive enough to oppose casteism. The next day, the

Dalit Panther held a mass protest against the Shankaracharya. It led to the arrest of Prahlad Chavan, Namdeo Chavan, Bhosale, Sarode and Ranpise. Avinash Mahatekar and I issued a public statement condemning the arrest and demanding that the cases filed against our youths be withdrawn. We also demanded the arrest of those indulging in spewing venom, like the Shankaracharya. Else, we warned, a statewide agitation would be launched.

In March, we had already challenged Hindu texts by burning the *Gita* and incurred the wrath of religious groups. On 23 April 1973, Dada Maharaj Manmadkar, from the Warkari sect (devotees of Lord Vitthal of Pandharpur), convened a meeting in Pune. The meeting condemned the Dalit Panther's burning of the Hindu holy texts. Saptarshi, who could not face the Shankaracharya in Pune during the scheduled debate, however, continued to go around delivering lectures against inequality. His lecture on "Varna System and Shankaracharya" was scheduled for 26 May 1973, at Nalasopara in Thane district. That day, even before he could start his lecture, some orthodox people disrupted the gathering. It led to a commotion in which volunteers of Yuvak Kranti Dal became involved. The police arrested Saptarshi instead of the orthodox intruders. We issued a statement demanding the release of Saptarshi. We had condemned the government for not taking action against the Shankaracharya who had trampled on the principles of the Constitution and asked whether the country was "Bharat" or "Hindustan".

We wanted a showdown with Shankaracharya and were waiting for him to visit Mumbai. We got a tip-off that he was going to visit the Jinnah House on Lamington Road to address a gathering of special invitees. Newspapers were informed about the visit though, to cover untoward incidents like throwing of footwear at him. He was supposed to arrive at 6.30pm and we had some of our youths (unknown to police officials) keep vigil at the venue. I was at an Iranian restaurant nearby. We waited and waited. Around 9pm, the organizers announced that the Shankaracharya had cancelled the visit. It was likely that intelligence officials had alerted the organizer to the possibility of a Dalit Panther agitation at the venue. Our

boys at the venue shouted slogans against the Shankaracharya like "Shankaracharya Ran Away" and "Shankaracharya Got Scared" for not having the nerve to face our ire. The Shankaracharya who had pledged to protect the tenets of his religion to the last drop of his blood didn't have the guts to face us. It was a victory for us because he had called off his scheduled tour of other cities too. Saptarshi, meanwhile, turned to newspapers to narrate his side of the story. He wrote two articles in *Maharashtra Times*. He acknowledged the contribution of Dalit Panther, socialists and communists in the whole episode. But Republican leaders, who used to swear by Babasaheb Ambedkar, had remained silent as the Shankaracharya made a mockery of the Constitution. They had compromised with the rulers and become spineless.

The 'Manifesto'

After the *Economic and Political Weekly* published reportage of the Dalit Panther's march of 14 August 1973, the social elite, especially those who espoused the Communist ideology, were drawn to us. Our stance was clearly explained in my article "Beyond Friendship", our speeches, press releases, the memorandum of demands submitted to the chief minister and the lectures of Dhale and Dhasal. Yet, some people insisted that we compile a document to formally spell out our ideology. Instigating these people was Sunil Dighe, who had already taken Dhasal under his control.

One day, Namdeo Dhasal, Sunil Dighe and Avinash Mahatekar came to my house and took me out for a "serious discussion". We went to an Iranian restaurant near Silver cinema, in the Play-House area. Though located in a red-light area, the restaurant was peaceful. Mahatekar, too, had come under the influence of Dighe at the time and had written a booklet titled "The Dalit Panther's onslaught on smuggled economics". The "serious discussion" would be about the Dalit Panther's mission statement that Dhasal had written. Dhasal started reading it, but he faltered as he reached Dighe's scribbles.

Dighe was an active member of the communist party. One of the girls working in my office used to live in the same building as Dighe and one day when he came to my office, she told me about his political ideology. I knew very well that he was a communist. When Dhasal began stuttering, Dighe took over and read it out effortlessly.

After listening to it, I suggested that the missions statement be discussed in the next monthly meeting of the Dalit Panther. I added

that if necessary, it would be amended by inviting suggestions from divisional heads, before making it official. Mahatekar agreed, but Dhasal was in a hurry. He went on to publish it, even though only two Dalit Panthers – Mahatekar and I – apart from he himself had read it.

To give the impression that all members were taken into confidence and that it was an authentic Dalit Panther document, the mission statement carried a picture of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar with the slogan "Sarva Satta Dalitanchya Haati" (all power in the hands of Dalits). Dhasal had mentioned himself as the publisher and given my residential address – D-32, Siddharth Nagar, Baptist Road, Mumbai 400008 – as the publisher's address. Ever since I became the general secretary of the Dalit Panther, this had been the address for correspondence with our organization. If it were an authentic document, I would have been mentioned as the publisher, along with a joint secretary. But Dhasal has spelt out his own stand and had mentioned my address to give the document an authentic feel.

Meanwhile, all the litterateurs among us were writing for Baburao Bagul's monthly magazine *Amhi* (We). Baburao was making arrangements for "Diwali Ank" – the special issue of the magazine for the Diwali festival. Its theme was Dalit Panthers. My article, "Beyond Friendship", was included in it. Dhasal's article on Dalit Panther's policy was also part of it. Dhasal and Dighe tried hard to project Dhasal's article as the manifesto of our organization. It was translated into English and circulated. The Gujarati translation was titled "Jahirnama" (Manifesto).

The Dalit Panther was gaining strength among youths and I wanted to prevent any internal differences from becoming public, for it would have affected our credibility. *Maratha* published Dhasal's "Bhumika" (stand) as our manifesto. Under the heading, "Amhala Brahman Aleet Jaagaa nako, Sarva Deshache Rajya Havay" (We don't want space in the lane of Brahmins but we want power in the entire country), it carried Dhasal's quote that Dalit Panthers had been targeting not individuals but the entire system to end exploitation.

The "manifesto" in *Maratha* included policy matters: "the so-

ciety will not change merely by Constitutional methods, requests, concessions, elections and satyagraha". Such statements left our youths perplexed. Many of them started assuming that the Dalit Panther had given up parliamentary methods and adopted communism. It coincided with a wave of appreciation of Dhasal among communist leaders across the country.

To clear the confusion, Raja Dhale wrote a series of articles in *Nava Kaal*. We also printed booklets. Since *Nava Kaal* was not being distributed in Nagpur and Nanded districts, I took galley proofs of the composed matter from its editor Neelubhau and rearranged the pages to suit a booklet. Ironically, a communist poet, Satish Kalsekar, helped us prepare the booklet. The expenses were mounting and I had to bear them. Those who wrote the pro-communist manifesto of the Dalit Panther were communists and the person who helped us to counter it was also a communist. Funny, isn't it?

Justice for the rural folk

An incident at Bhugaon in Pune district on 17 September 1973 received wide publicity. After our public meeting in the village, Namdeo Dhasal and Avinash Mahatekar toured the village. The villagers were clever but when the duo entered the village on Sudhir Bedekar's motorcycle, they trembled with fear. The elite of the village capitulated. It added to our glory, but atrocities continued unabated.

In Askhed village, in Rajgurunagar (Khed) tehsil, an upper-caste strongman Dagadoo Baburao Limbore held Vitthu Dagadoo More, a Dalit, at gunpoint and asked him to stop tilling his land of 30 acres. Limbore used to forcibly occupy and till agricultural land. Fearing for his life, More migrated from the village to Mumbai and started living on the pavement between Marine Lines and Churchgate railway stations. When we came to know about More's plight, we decided to visit Askhed.

Visiting a village was not a big deal for us and merely a day's notice was enough to put together a team. We planned to board the Pune passenger train from Mumbai on 13 October 1973 and informed some Chhawni heads. Dilip Jagtap, who used to live in the Pestom Sagar area of Chembur, took the lead in mobilizing the youth. Eventually, we had a group of 92 youths. We got down from the train at Talegaon railway station. It was a cold winter morning. We walked 12km to reach the village.

The news of our arrival had reached the village before we had even set foot in it. In Pune district, where the Peshwas (Brahmin rulers) had inflicted atrocities against Dalits, the name of Dalit Panther was enough to strike fear into the casteist forces. When we

reached the village we came to know that Limbore had fled, leaving behind a standing crop of tomato. There was nobody to claim or guard the tomatoes. We asked More to take over the standing crop and then tasted some farm-fresh tomatoes. Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar and I were leading the contingent.

Though More had regained custody of his field, it was necessary to make it legal. Hence, I wrote a letter to the regional officer of the Junnar revenue circle on 24 October 1973. I pointed out that Limbore, in connivance with the local Talathi (revenue official), had grabbed 30 acres of land (survey No 18/1) belonging to More. Since it was an Inami (grant) land bequeathed to a Dalit, I wrote, it could neither be auctioned nor transferred to a non-Dalit and hence had to be restored to its rightful owner, More. I also wrote a letter to our Pune district chief Anil Kamble on the same day, asking him to visit Askhed, if necessary, with 100 to 200 youths and meet Dagadoo Patil. Kamble wrote back on 1 November 1973, informing me about a meeting over the issue. The meeting had made the village tense and had led to the arrest of Sadashiv Bhosale, Vinayak Sonawane and Prakash Chavan. Kamble wrote that Jaidev Gaikwad and L. D. Bhosale had helped in resolving the issue. Ultimately, More got justice. I issued a public statement, "Exploitation of Dalit farmer ends, Rich farmer surrenders before Dalit Panthers", revealing details of the entire episode.

There was another incident in Pune district that drew our attention. Yenere was one of the 500,000 villages in India, where Dalits were subjected to exploitation as a right. Ironically, the village panchayat had been conferred an "Untouchability Removal Award". According to the policy of granting developmental works to such villages after the drought of 1972, a paved road between Yenere and Katede was to be built. Ironically, these developmental projects pushed the Dalits further into the margins. The upper-caste people ensured that such projects took away from the Dalits what little they had, for instance, by charting out a course for the road through their land, even if it meant making them landless.

The Yenere village panchayat passed a resolution that the road to Katede would pass through the cremation ground of local Bud-

dhists. The upper castes and the Dalits had designated, separate areas to cremate their dead. The alternative to building the road through the Buddhist cremation site was to use survey No 4 to link it with the main road, but then it would have passed through the farm of the village Patil (headman). It would also have cut through a portion of the local Muslim graveyard and the villagers did not want a communal flare-up. Hence, the easy way out was to trample upon the interests of Dalits – the Buddhist cremation ground and some fields of Buddhists – using survey No 3.

This news came to us from Bhau Baburao Gaikwad via one of our activists, Bhangre, from Tadwadi. I wrote a letter to the rural development minister on 5 November 1973 and sent a copy to the sarpanch of Yenere. I also approached newspapers with a map that showed that the road has been planned in such a way that the village headman didn't lose any of his land. The Yenere village panchayat discussed my letter in its monthly meeting held on 15 November 1973. The village panchayat passed the buck to the state government saying that it was the state government that assigned the project to the village as part of its drought relief programme and that the Yenere village panchayat was not responsible for the course the road would take. Yenere sarpanch Vitthal Maruti Dhole signed this village panchayat meeting resolution. After the village panchayat threw up its hands, I rushed to newspapers with maps that showed that the road would destroy the cremation ground of Buddhists.

The Buddhists of Yenere were poor. Many of the men were landless and had migrated to Mumbai in search of livelihood. Most of them used to buy fruits from the wholesale market and sell them. They used to send money to their families in Yenere. The idea of cutting the road through Buddhists cremation ground was to hound out the Buddhists. In fact, the village, which had been honoured for stopping untouchability, could have set a trend by adopting "Ek Gaon, Ek Masanvata" (one village, one crematorium) along the lines of "one village, one water source". But Yenere didn't do so.

Along with Avinash Mahatekar and two others, I visited the village. We noticed that the drains were built close to the cluster of houses of Buddhists. At a meeting held in the village panchayat of-

fice, I bombarded the sarpanch with a volley of questions, while Mahatekar curtly tried to make them see reason. After the sarpanch and police personnel admitted that the planned course of the road was detrimental to the interests of Buddhists, residents of the village promised to scrap the road project and also replan the drains. Interestingly, many people at the meeting told us that it was the idea of two government overseers, one Deshpande and one Jangam, to build the road through the Buddhist cremation ground. The village panchayat passed a resolution that people of different religions and castes would live in the village in the spirit of fraternity. I wrote a letter to the chief executive officer of the zilla parishad (district council) stating that Buddhists would continue to use their cremation ground.

This episode loosened the grip of casteism on the village to an extent. Although it continued to exist in the minds of the people, they couldn't practice it so blatantly. The traditional mindset inspired by *Manusmriti* that a Dalit could be exploited as a matter of divine right received a setback. The fear of being on the wrong side of the law also played a major role and it spread to the entire tehsil of Junnar. In the entire Pune district, we became a force to reckon with. The incident raised the morale of Buddhists, who were poor and gullible.

The Askhed and Yenere cases made exploited Dalits in Pune district turn to the Dalit Panthers for help. Those who could not travel to Mumbai started meeting Anil Kamble, Jaidev Gaikwad and L.D. Bhosale in Pune. Namdeo Dhasal used to be available for advice.

One of these people brought to our attention a case of landgrabbing in Gonwadi village, near Ambethan, in Rajgurunagar tehsil, again in Pune district. Village headman Deoram Genu Mohite and his brother Tukaram had forcibly taken over the 23.26-acre land belonging to a Dalit farmer Bhima Shankar Gaikwad and were tilling it.

We informed the local divisional chiefs of Dalit Panthers and prepared to leave Mumbai by train. Initially, I was sceptical over the turnout of youths. When the train left the then Victoria Termi-

nus station (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminal), the number of youths was not quite what we had for the trip to Askhed. However, at the Byculla station, a large crowd entered the train. The same thing happened at Kurla, Thane and Kalyan stations. The number of youths swelled to around 350. Both Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar had accompanied us to Askhed, but Bhai could not make it for this trip.

We got down from the train at Talegaon rai!way station in the morning and went to the village. We made all the youths stand outside the village and only four to five of us, including two well-built youths, entered the village. We went to Mohite's house and knocked on the door but there was no response. When Gaikwad and Jadhav yelled out his name, Mohite opened the door. We told them that we were Dalit Panthers and wanted him to hand over the disputed land. He refused to accept the charge and an argument ensued, drawing others from the village. During the course of the argument, Jadhav grabbed Mohite's neck and asked him to look east, where around 350 Dalit Panthers were visible at a distance. Mohite was horrified and his family members started wailing. He was speechless.

We gave him an ultimatum: If the land was not handed over by noon, 350 Dalit Panthers would forcibly acquire it and restore it to the rightful owner. We said that we would not be responsible if anybody was harmed while trying to stop our youths from setting things right. We told the Mohite family that it would be responsible for any untoward incident. Meanwhile, we asked our youths to wait till noon. I wrote a memorandum to the police and submitted it at the nearest police outpost. I clearly mentioned that if Mohite refused to restore the land, we would forcibly occupy it. Although I mentioned in the memorandum that a copy had been marked to the District Superintendent of Police (DSP), Pune (Rural), we had not actually sent a copy to the DSP.

The police constable on duty at the outpost was alarmed when he read our memorandum, because our style of functioning had become well known in the district after the Askhed incident. He presumed that a copy of the memorandum had been submitted to the

DSP and soon a contingent of police rushed to Gonwadi. To make sure that he, being the local policeman, was at the spot first, he came to the village. We could see that Mohite was afraid. He was also worried about his reputation being tarnished if he was arrested in front of the villagers.

We held a meeting and asked Mohite whether he would let go of the land or wait till we forcibly occupied it. The situation was tense. Ultimately, Mohite agreed to let go of the land. I had anticipated this end result and had brought a stamp paper of Rs 5 from Mumbai to complete the legal formality. We prepared an agreement on the stamp paper and the land was returned to Bhima. Part of the agreement was that 50 per cent of the standing crop would go to Bhima, and Mohite would pay Bhima Rs 1,000 within two months as compensation for use of the land. The agreement was signed between Mohite and the Dalit Panther. The signatories were Deoram Genu Mohite, Tukaram Genu Mohite, Avinash Mahatekar and me. We wanted the local police constable to sign as a witness, but he was afraid of getting caught up in litigation. Later, when we asked him to sign as an individual, he agreed and mentioned his buckle number below his signature. Then he erased the buckle number for fear of being reprimanded by his seniors. If this dispute were taken to court, it would have taken Bhima at least 15 years to get his land back. We resolved it in a day in the court of the people.

Bhima got his land back, but he was still nervous because he could not afford to arrange food for the 350 youths who had got him justice. A heap of groundnuts was lying in front of Mohite's house and when one of our youths picked up one, an elderly lady of the house asked him to take as much as he could. He did, and other youths followed his cue to feast on the groundnuts. Later, they drank water. Bhima was in tears. We took leave and walked back to Talegaon railway station to board the Mumbai-bound train.

This was a major victory for Dalit Panthers. Numerous more such cases in Pune district were brought to our notice, in which we intervened without actually visiting those places. Merely a warning from the Dalit Panther was enough to set things right in villages, village panchayats and tehsil offices.

Fighting injustice done to the upper-caste

Dalits being subjected to injustice was the order of the day, but liberal upper-caste people were also being harassed because they supported Dalits. In Nipani, on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border, Prof Narendra Kukde and Prof Subhash Joshi had come out in support of the Dalit Panther. While Kukde was a communist, Joshi was a socialist and both used to participate in events and agitations organized by the liberals. Little did they know that their support for us would land them in trouble, because it was normal for professors subscribe to one or other ideology, including that of the RSS. In fact, those belonging to the RSS used to be felicitated.

Kukde and Joshi were actively involved in organizing meetings of the Dalit Panther in the Kolhapur-Belgaon-Nipani belt. Kukde presided over a public meeting held in Nipani on 28 April 1974. Both the professors were teaching at Devchand College in Arjun Nagar, Kolhapur. The Janata Shikshan Mandal ran the college. The management of the college issued a show-cause notice to them for being involved in the activities of the Dalit Panther. Devchand Shah, the chairperson of the college, had signed the notice. The notice said that such activities spoilt the college atmosphere, tarnished the image of its teaching staff and were highly objectionable. It further stated that the government had sought a clarification from the college on the activities of the Dalit Panther, hinting that the government would express displeasure and penalize the duo.

The notice manifested the bias of non-Dalits towards not only Dalits but also those who supported their cause. The college management harboured hatred for the lower castes and had cleverly

sought to involve the government in the issue. In fact, teachers taking part in a public meeting for a social cause was normal and there was no precedent of such teachers being punished or dismissed for indiscipline. The notice meant that the jobs of both the professors were at stake for supporting us and we had to deal with it. It would have been disastrous for them to lose their jobs. The incident could also have given the Dalit Panther a bad name.

As soon as we received a letter dated 21 May 1974 from Prof Kukde about the notice, we wrote to our Kolhapur district chief Datta Jadhav, instructing him to meet Devchand Shah and ask him to withdraw the show-cause notice. We also told Jadhav to organize demonstrations in protest if Shah refused to do so. I also wrote to Shah asking him to furnish a copy of the letter (along with the reference number and desk number) in which the government's education department expressed displeasure over the participation of Prof Kukde and Prof Joshi in our activities. We knew that the management of the college was bluffing. I told Shah in the letter that if he was unable to produce the letter from the government, he had no option but to withdraw the show-cause notice and publicly apologize to the Dalit Panther, or face our wrath. Shah did not reply. I had visited the desk officer concerned in the education department and confirmed that the government had issued no such letter to Shah.

I kept giving out press releases to keep the issue alive. Newspapers published reports of the college "with the connivance of the state government", victimizing the professors for supporting Dalit Panthers. We condemned the state government for attempting to suppress a movement whose mission was to seek justice for Dalits. Shah's attempt to involve the government backfired because the latter had not expressed displeasure or issued any guidelines with regard to the activities of the Dalit Panther.

We also decided to put more pressure on Shah to prevent him from harassing Kukde and Joshi again. We asked a socialist, Dharia Sheth, who was the elder brother of socialist leader and a minister of state in the Union government, Mohan Dharia, to intervene. Dharia Sheth was from Nipani and a major tobacco trader. Even-

tually, we only had to send a reminder to Shah before he buckled under pressure. There was no need to launch an agitation against him and his institution for victimizing the professors. The Janata Shikshan Mandal withdrew the show-cause notice and closed the case.

It was a victory for us in an unchartered area. We had saved the jobs of two professors who belonged to the upper castes. It sent a positive message across the academic world and the intelligentsia. Non-Dalits and the educated class, who used to think that the Dalit Panther was an organization exclusively for the Dalits, had to re-consider. Later, even government employees, irrespective of caste, started seeking our help.

The buffalo of Dnyaneshwar and the government

In 1973, Dussehra was to be celebrated on 6 October and the government declared that it would felicitate Vedic Brahmins on the occasion, continuing a 12-year-old practice. The idea was to encourage Brahmins to recite the Vedas from memory. Such a Brahmin used to be called Vedonarayan or a Vedic scholar. According to a legend, Saint Dnyaneshwar had asked a male buffalo to recite the Vedas to mock orthodox Brahmins. The difference between Dnyaneshwar's bull and the government's bull was that the former had four legs, while the latter, two.

Vedas preach inequality and divide society, which is against the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The government's official recognition of Vedic principles manifested the mindset of those in power and insulted the Constitution. Any programme of the government continues till it is opposed, so we took it up. The socialist party was also opposed to it, though it had some orthodox Brahmins in it. It also had some semi-progressive members like Dr Baba Adhav.

I issued a public statement on 1 October 1973 demanding that the government stop the felicitation programme. I pointed out that instead of felicitating scientists and thinkers, the government had chosen to felicitate Vedic scholars, effectively turning back the wheel of progress. I asked the government to immediately stop the felicitation being held at public expense, or else wait for the Dalit Panther to turn up the heat. It was then that Adhav came to my

house along with Pannalal Surana, Narayan Tawde and Prof A.B. Shah. He gave me a copy of the Socialist Party's public statement that asked the government to stop such felicitations and announced an agitation at 9am on 6 October.

Meanwhile, I sent out a circular among our members stating that the government had chosen to felicitate Vedic Brahmins on the pretext of preserving cultural traditions; that this was against the principle of secularism and such exercises would promote orthodox Hinduism, which in turn would result in more atrocities against Dalits. I informed our members that the Dalit Panther would disrupt the felicitation programme to be held at 10am on 6 October at Raj Bhavan, the governor's official residence. I asked our members to gather at August Kranti Maidan, Gowalia Tank, on that day. I expected our youths to gather by 11am, before marching to Raj Bhavan.

Adhav wanted a joint protest of the Socialist Party and the Dalit Panther. Since both the organizations were fighting for the same cause, I agreed. Some Socialists gathered at Wilson College around 9am. I sent a message to Adhav asking him to wait for some time because our members were still on the way to August Kranti Maidan. They had to wait as they did not have a large enough crowd. Kamlakar Subhedar, a leader of the Samajwadi Yuvak Sabha, had announced that the organization would participate in the demonstration, but its members could not be seen. Some members of the Yuvak Kranti Dal had arrived.

I knew that we would not be allowed anywhere near the venue, that we would be barricaded far away from it. The usual practice was to arrest the protestors and release them after a few hours. Meanwhile, the programme would be held on schedule and the agitators would have to remain content with photographs and reports published in newspapers. I wanted to go beyond the mock drill and actually disrupt the programme. I took Adhav and Tawde into confidence. Adhav was still sceptical because of the enhanced security arrangements. Our announcement of the demonstration had appeared in the media.

I had found a solution. The Raj Bhavan complex also has staff

quarters. One of my friends lived there at the time. He used to work with me in the telephone department and his father was among the Raj Bhavan staff. Two days before the event, he had showed us – a friend and me – a part of the complex facing the sea where it was easy for a person to jump over the compound wall. This friend of mine had managed to scale the wall with little effort. Once a person entered the compound, it was not difficult to enter the hall where the function would be held. I secretly chose some of our youths for the purpose and kept their numbers low. I expected them to enter the hall, disrupt the programme and create enough tension to make the Vedic Brahmins flee the venue.

On the day of the function, while I waited for our youths to arrive, I was getting worried over a low turnout, because in that case those intruding inside the hall would be badly beaten up. There was heavy police deployment. The socialists were getting restless. Two police officials were repeatedly asking me about the exact time we would start. I asked them to wait. Gradually, youths poured in from all sides like swarms of ants. We marched towards Wilson College, where the socialists were waiting to join us. Our boys were shouting slogans against the government. Eventually, the socialists joined us and we marched towards Raj Bhavan. We were stopped a long distance from Raj Bhavan, and our march turned into a public meeting. Mrunaltai Gore, Baba Adhav, Pannalal Surana and I spoke on the occasion.

I was curious about the developments inside Raj Bhavan and eavesdropped on the wireless messages coming from a police vehicle. From the messages it was clear that something had happened inside the hall where the ceremony was taking place. I feigned innocence and asked an intelligence officer known to me about the commotion inside Raj Bhavan. He told me that some intruders had tried to disrupt the ceremony by shouting slogans and they had been arrested. While he was speaking to me, a police van carrying our youths who were arrested inside the hall passed us on its way to the Gamdevi police station. The youths were still shouting slogans against the government.

When we were arrested and taken to the police station, we were

told that ten youths had shouted slogans inside the hall. I requested the officials to allow us to meet those youths. We were permitted to do so. Adhav, Gore and I met them. I also demanded that they be released with us. The official spoke to his seniors on the telephone. The seniors told them that the detained men could be released since they had not damaged anything. The youths had stalled the ceremony for about 15 minutes by shouting slogans.

Those protesting against the government are never allowed to enter Mantralaya (secretariat) or Raj Bhavan. The Dalit Panther became the first organization to enter Raj Bhavan and protest in front of the dignitaries. It was because we had courageous supporters who were willing to fight for a wider cause and suffer the consequences. They were not fighting for any political gain or position but, having come under the influence of Babasaheb Ambedkar's movement, they wanted to change society. When I met them at Gamdevi Police Station, they shouted slogans hailing Babasaheb and the Dalit Panther.

While addressing the protestors I had said that if the government continued with such felicitation ceremonies in the future, our organization would destroy the structures in which such programmes would be held. However, we did not have to do such a thing. From 1974 onwards, the state government discontinued the practice of felicitating Vedic Brahmins.

Communal riots in Worli, Naigaon

The BDD chawls located in Sewree, Worli, Naigaon and Delisle Road areas of Mumbai are old and densely populated by the working class. For years, while it was known that BDD chawls were working-class localities, what the "BDD" stood for came to be known only because of the Worli riots. BDD stood for Bombay (now Mumbai) Development Directorate. Similarly, there are BIT (Bombay Improvement Trust) chawls, housing working-class people. These entities no longer exist, but the chawls themselves continue to house the workers, including Dalits. There is no limit to the number of people occupying a tenement as the joint families of residents also have to accommodate relatives from their native places coming to Mumbai in search of a livelihood. There are also tenements occupied exclusively by bachelors, who share a single room after a hard day's work in their dream city.

In the Seventies, it was mostly the textile-mill workers who lived in the BDD chawls of Worli. Since communist trade unions were strong in the mills, the workers were their members. However, communism, that seeks to unite the workers of the world, failed to bind the workers here. A worker used to be a worker as long as he was in the factory. Once he stepped outside and returned home, the colonies reminded him of his caste. He used to become a Maratha, a Charmakar, a Dhor or a Buddhist. The trade unions run by communists and socialists focused only on higher salaries and bonus. Had they followed the teachings of Mahatma Jotiba Phule, the process of transformation would have been expedited and the workers would not have remained divided along caste lines.

The colonies of workers accommodated Dalits as well as non-Dalits who took pride in their traditional social hierarchy despite the communist ideology harping on the binary of "haves" and "have-nots".

Worli mainly housed Dalits from Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur and Pune districts of Maharashtra. The political party of the Buddhists was the Republican Party of India. However, because the fragmentation of the party, they had no option but to align themselves with one or the other faction of the party. This factionalism led to a conflict between the Bhandare and Kamble groups.

There is an open ground in the area named Gandhi Maidan, where Republican leader R.D. Bhandare had held a demonstration in 1946 against Mahatma Gandhi. He and his followers had waved black flags at Gandhiji and shouted "go back". The demonstrations were held against the backdrop of the Ambedkar-Gandhi row. Gandhiji, who had started the "Quit India" movement on 9 August 1942, had to face a similar movement against him. Ironically, Bhandare, who had organized the demonstrations against Gandhiji, later joined the Congress party.

The main political opponent of the Congress party in those days was Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Hence, the Congress party's policy was to sow divisions among his lieutenants and wean them away from the Ambedkarite movement. Bhandare fell prey to such tactics and joined the Congress party on 15 August 1965. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Bhandare openly supported the Congress party's policies. The party rewarded him with a seat in the Lok Sabha.

Eventually, as atrocities against Dalits increased across the country, including Bihar, and the Dalit Panther highlighted the issue, the Congress appointed Bhandare as the governor of Bihar. That was done to send a message to Dalits that one of them had been honoured as the Constitutional head of a state. Bhandare had to resign as a member of the Lok Sabha to take up his new assignment. This created a vacancy in the Lok Sabha and necessitated a by-election for the Mumbai South-Central constituency, which included the Worli locality.

The Congress party nominated Ramrao Adik as its candidate. The by-election became a matter of prestige for the party as it was presumed that after getting elected, Adik would be inducted in the Union Cabinet as the law minister. The situation was not in favour of the Congress party because mill workers were on strike and anti-incumbency factor had become crucial. The party was not sure of its victory, but anyhow wanted to win the seat. In Worli, Dalit votes were substantial and key to success. Unlike Dalits in villages, where they were in the minority and were vulnerable, Dalits in a city like Mumbai were a force to reckon with.

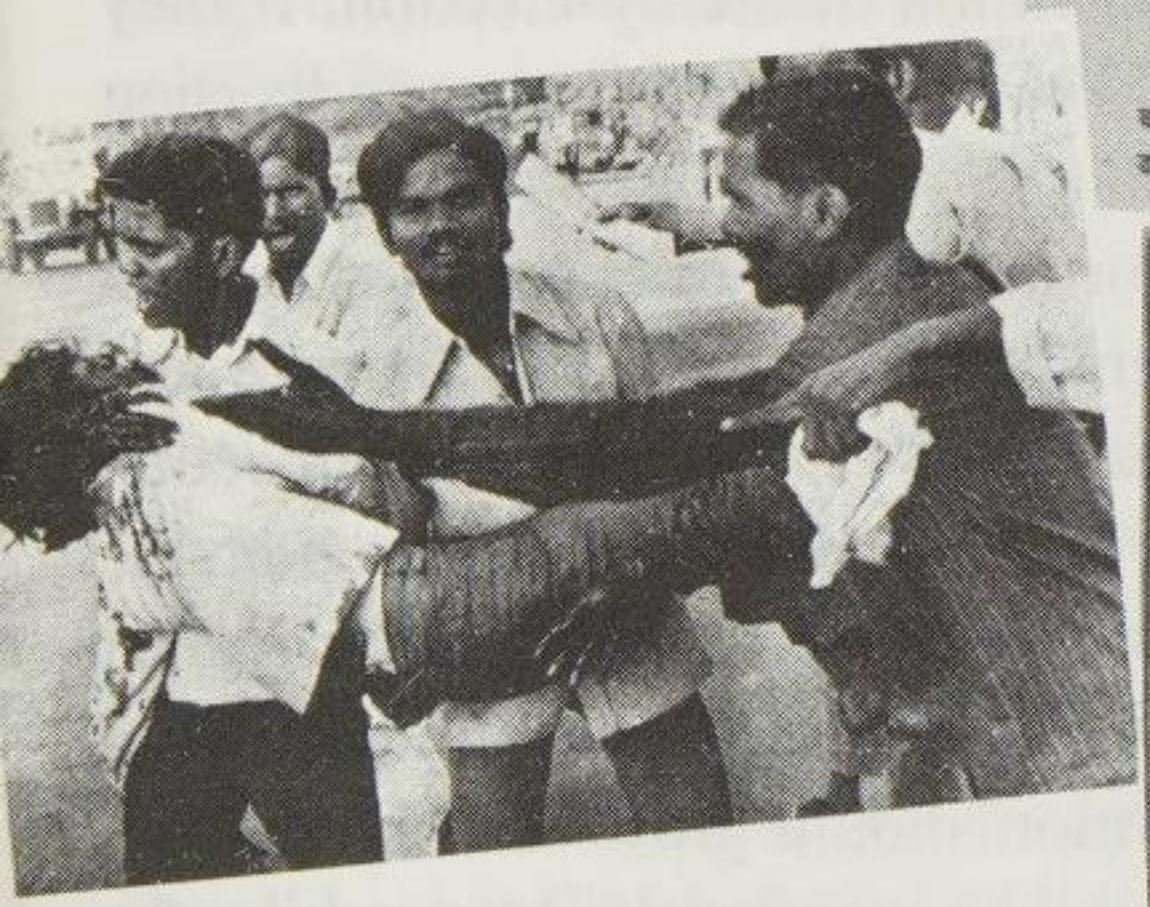
We decided to boycott the by-election to make Congress party see that ruining the Republican Party of India by gobbling up Babasaheb's lieutenants came at a cost. The Congress promptly responded by getting the secretary of its Mumbai unit, Kakasaheb Mengade, to contact us. The Mumbai unit chief of the Congress was Rajani Patel, who, along with Mengade, was ideologically inclined towards the Left. Two close aides of Mangade were Premanand Awale and Dr Bansode, the office-bearers in the Backward Classes cell of the Congress party. I was acquainted with Dr Bansode as he used to live in a slum, was connected with the Dalit movement and had regard for the Dalit Panther.

Those days, Dalit Panther leaders were named in too many legal cases, registered during agitations. Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal were faced with cases in various courts across Maharashtra. The most number of cases had been registered against Dhale. There were cases against Bhai Sangare and me, too. The only Dalit Panther leader who had not been booked was Avinash Mahatekar. Annoyed that the Dalit Panther was gaining strength, the government ensured that our leaders were kept busy travelling across Maharashtra to appear in courts for trial. There were instances when they had to attend a court in Nagpur on a Monday and immediately rush to Kolhapur to attend another case on Tuesday. It was a clear-cut strategy of harassment. We wanted the government to club together all the cases from different locations and conduct the trial in one court.

While this was going on, the government announced that cases

Communal clashes erupt in Bombay's BDD chawls (tenement buildings), a number of which are occupied by policemen. Here policemen are shown joining in the stone-throwing.

वरित पंचरचा मोर्चा. (डावीकडून) पहिले वार्ताहराच्या कामगिरीवर 'मनोहर'चे डॉ. अनिल अवचट. तिसरे आणि चौथे पंचर–नेते अ. वि- पवार आणि अर्जुन सांगळे



Photos of the Worli riots that appeared in the newspapers. Bottom left: Bhagwat Jadhav is carried off after being hit by a grinding stone; the Panther succumbed to his injuries.

registered against the members of Yuvak Kranti Dal had been withdrawn. We demanded that the cases registered against our members be withdrawn, too. Dr Baba Adhav supported our demand and wrote an article in *Saadhanaa*. The Yuvak Kranti Dal, Dr Adhav and socialist leader S.M. Joshi had good relations with Sharad Pawar, who was with Congress then and, as the minister of state for home affairs, had the authority to take a decision.

Dr Bansode conveyed a message to me that the Mumbai unit of the Congress party was in favour of our demand to club the cases against us in one court. He told me that Mengade wanted to discuss the matter with us. We decided to meet him and I, along with Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal, when to Mengade's residence in Dadar. We discussed the issue of clubbing the cases in a single court and Mengade sought an appointment with chief minister Vansantrao Naik on 2 January 1974. We were sceptical about the meeting taking place because a general strike, "Bharat Bandh", was observed that day.

We still went to meet the chief minister as planned and found that several other leaders like S.M. Joshi, M.P. Rege and Dadasaheb Rupawate were seated in the chief minister's chamber. Naik told us that cases filed against us would be withdrawn. Nothing else was discussed. There was no mention of the by-election. If they had uttered that word, we would have told them about our decision to boycott it.

Later, Mengade asked us for the details of cases filed against us. We prepared a list and went to his house. Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar accompanied me. This was my second meeting with Mengade as the secretary of the Dalit Panther and in both the meetings, nothing was discussed except the pending cases against us. Mengade projected himself as a sympathizer of the Dalit Panther and said that the organization should grow and should also have its own office. We did not take it seriously. Meanwhile, the Mumbai unit chief of the Congress, Rajani Patel, met Namdeo Dhasal and Vitthalrao Sathe, without our knowledge. Sathe told me about the food they had together. I presumed that the trio would have discussed the withdrawal of cases filed against us and did not

seek details from either Sathe or Dhasal.

We held a meeting of the Dalit Panther's Mumbai unit on 31 December 1973 in Naigaon. Bal, the son of Dr Ambedkar's biographer C.B. Khairmode, was elected a joint secretary. After the meeting we went for a condolence meeting for an activist, Surve, at Dadasaheb Gaikwad Nagar in Raoli Camp. Dhale handed over the policy document for the forthcoming by-election. I gave it for printing at the Mahadev Printing Press in Naigaon. The document elaborated the reasons of our boycott. The printing press was a great help for Ambedkarites. I paid some advance and insisted on delivery by 7pm on January 5. We would pay the remaining cost of printing through the sale of the document at our meeting with our activists. It was priced at 50 paise each. I didn't have money to cover the entire cost of printing. The printer was a friend.

Kakasaheb Mengade had asked me to meet him a couple days after submitting the list of pending cases against us. He was also going to give me the details of whether a speech delivered at a particular meeting had led to a riot. I did not meet him or telephone him for a few days, giving him time for the purpose. On 5 January, on our way to a public meeting we had organized at Ambedkar Maidan, Worli, I, along with Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar, stopped by the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee's office at Tilak Bhavan. Mengade was not in the office. We enquired about him with Govindrao Adik, who was a secretary of the state unit of Congress party. Some people were sitting in his cabin. We left a message for Mengade and went to Worli for our public meeting.

When we reached Worli, one of our workers pointed to a hoarding that the Shiv Sena had put up at Worli Naka. The Sena had promised the people that it would teach the Dalit Panthers a lesson for abusing Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The hoarding had created tension in the area, making it the talking point among the local people. I went to Worli police station, leaving the responsibility of working out the details of our public meeting to Sangare and our local activists. I informed the officer in charge of the police station, S.J. Surve, about the provocative hoarding. He told me that the controversial hoarding would be brought down and confiscated. He

didn't have courage to actually do it though.

The atmosphere at the meeting was different. There was heavy police deployment. This had to do with the provocating hoarding as well as the curiosity over our stand on the by-election. Vasant Kamble presided over the meeting. When I reached the venue with Sangare and Mahatekar, Dhale and Dhasal had yet to arrive. Sometime later, Dhasal arrived with Anil Barve. Later, Dhale turned up. On the dais was Kartarsingh Thatte, about whom I had some reservation. He asked permission to speak. I told him that since it was a meeting to announce our stand for the election, only authorized people would be allowed to speak. He said he would not deliver a speech but just announce, in a minute, a donation for the Dalit Panther. I knew Thatte was a pauper but I granted his request and told Kamble to allow him to speak.

When he got up to speak, Thatte criticized the Congress government and declared a donation of Rs 1 lakh to the Dalit Panther. We, however, did not take it seriously. Mahatekar, Sangare and I delivered our speeches. I announced that the Dalit Panthers would boycott the poll process. There was some commotion in a corner of the gathering. I thought it was because some people may not have liked our stand. Just then a stone was pelted at the dais. I asked the police to intervene and there was some activity, after which everything was quiet. I elaborated on the reasons for our boycott and released our document. Dhasal rose to speak after I concluded. When he referred to Lord Shiva and his trident, another stone was pelted in the direction of the dais. He winded up his speech and left the venue with Anil Barve.

After him, it was Dhale's turn. As soon as he came to the microphone, a volley of stones was hurled at both the dais and the audience from all directions. I took the microphone and urged the police personnel to restrain the culprits, but instead they started beating up the members of the audience. The police lathi-charge and the our detractors' stone-pelting disrupted the meeting. The audience ran helter-skelter and the violence continued. I condemned the police for taking the side of the mob.

A police official asked our sound system operator to turn off

the loudspeakers. I argued with the official, but in vain. The loudspeakers remained muted. Since the assailants were targeting Dhale, some of our youths shielded him and helped him to come down from the stage. Sangare and I were running around on the ground, offering help to those injured and also identifying the culprits and asking the police to act against them. Our youths were enraged but there were too many policemen around, lathis in hand and ignoring the culprits.

As the attack continued, some angry women came together and took out a march, shouting slogans against the police. I went with them to the police station. The station in-charge, Surve, was not in his office. When he arrived sometime later, I told him about the entire episode. I asked him to take action against the police personnel who were working hand in glove with the mob. Subsequently, I came to know that most of the men in uniform who had indulged in stone-pelting were sons of policemen. Local newspaper photographers caught some of them on camera, but the police still did not take action against them. Since there was no hope of getting any justice, I returned to the venue of the meeting.

When I reached the ground, it looked like a battlefield. There were stones, footwear and weapons lying around. Sangare and I tried to restrain our youths even as the stones continued to be hurled at us. While I was trying to reason with an assistant commissioner of police at the spot, I saw Dhale, Dayanand Mhaske and some of our youths, being surrounded by policemen. Dhale was talking to a Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) and pointing at the direction from where the stones were being hurled. To my horror, the lathi-wielding policemen assaulted him. He was hit on the head and the lathis did not stop even after he tried to shield his head with his hands. Profusely bleeding and with a broken finger, he was rushed to a hospital. Mhaske had also sustained injuries and was bleeding. That whole operation, as it turned out, was aimed at arresting Dhale. After getting medical attention, Dhale was arrested.

That entire night, Sangare and I moved among the BDD chawls to console the residents and meet the victims. When we went to meet Dhale at Agripada Police Station, I came to know that arrest

warrants had been issued against four of us – Dhasal, Sangare, Mahatekar and me. We were in touch with the police the whole night, but no police official had taken action against us. The decision to arrest us appeared to have been taken in the morning. We decided to go underground.

The situation in Worli was tense, with the people – both Dalits and non-Dalits – wanting to take revenge. Since Dhale was in custody and four of us were underground, we had to resort to secret methods to communicate with one another. One of us used to visit Worli and gather information. Once, I went to the Mayanagar slum and was told that one of the youths was experimenting with bomb-making. Kobad Gandhi, an ultra-communist, frequented Mayanagar. He was supervising the experiment. I had no knowledge about these things, and I vehemently opposed when I made this discovery. The youth involved in the experiment was disappointed, but the fact was that such things had no place in our movement. My visit to the slum thus thwarted a potential crude bomb explosion. I left the slum as the word of my visit went around and people started gathering, but not before instructing one of our activists, Rajesh Bhalerao, to remain stationed in the locality.

On 6 January, none of us could meet the other. The next day, we decided to keep our messages with G.L. Reddy. He had a telephone at his residence. We were aware that the police could be tapping his telephone, so we used fake names. We adopted the names of the Pandavas in the epic Mahabharata. Our elder brother Dhale, who was in custody, was Yudhistir. I was Bhim (probably because of my physique), Dhasal was Arjun, Sangare was Sahdeo and Mahatekar was Nakul. Whenever we called up Reddy, he would tell us about the other brothers. Sometimes, we used to disguise ourselves and meet in his house at night. His maid was generous and used to cook for us even if it was late. The entire Reddy family was very helpful to us.

Since there was a need to raise our voices against the hooliganism of the police personnel, we planned to hold a protest march and met in Siddharth Nagar, Baptist Road. Sunil Dighe was also present. Meanwhile, the police were focused on Worli, which we

seldom visited. Newspapers had painted us as villains, as if we had started the riot. At our meeting, someone proposed a route for the march: Devrukhkar Chowk, Naigaon, Hind Mata, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Road, Bharat Mata Bridge and Worli. I proposed the Elphinstone Bridge instead of the Bharat Mata Bridge. My proposal was rejected, so we settled for Bharat Mata Bridge. It was not the time for arguments. If the meeting had gone on for any longer, the police might have got a wind of it and nabbed us. We dispersed after deciding to take out the march on 10 January.

The posters announcing the protest had my name as the publisher although I did not go to the printing press. We published 10,000 copies and by 9 January, we had stuck the posters in Dalit localities. Dalits were angry at the behaviour of the police personnel during the Worli incident and wanted to voice their anguish.

Namdeo Dhasal, Sunil Dighe and Bal Khairmode opined that if the march passed through mill workers' localities, more people would join us. However, I had a different opinion. I told them that mill workers, even those who espoused communist ideology, would give more importance to religion and, instead of supporting us, look to make us pay for being opponents of Hinduism. I was sure that Dalit workers would join us in large numbers. As we continued to remain underground, we were not actively involved in organizing the march. Our trusted lieutenants like Suresh Sawant, Bal Khairmode, Umakant Randhir, Anant Bachchav and Umesh Mane were doing the work on our behalf.

We went underground on 6 January. My daughter Angela's first birthday was to be celebrated on 8 January. It became a sentimental issue for me because when she was born, I was away at Igatpuri where a riot had broken out. While underground, all four of us wanted by the police, used to move around in disguise. My hair had grown longer than usual and I used to sport a fake moustache. I went to my wife's uncle living in the Nagpada police quarters near Nagpada police station and sent a message to my wife in Siddharth Nagar. My wife, along with our daughter, came to meet me. I had to remain content with celebrating my daughter's first birthday by just looking at her for a while. I had no more time to spare.

Somehow, I thought that this was the best place for us to meet because policemen are also human beings and when they go home, they are ordinary people.

Participating in the march on 10 January was going to be a dicey affair. The police would arrest us even before the march began and there could be serious consequences with so many angry youths around. But we wanted Dhale to be released and also protest against the hooliganism in Worli, so we planned to join the march midway at Hind Mata cinema. It was screening the Hindi film *Yaadon Ki Baraat* at the time. We were not interested in the film but booking for a show was a good way for us to find each other and then join the march together. Our friends booked four tickets and had them secretly sent to us. We entered the theatre separately, without acknowledging each other, after the lights had been switched off and the show had begun. We occupied the seats as if we were strangers to each other – without uttering even a word. Even during the interval, we did not speak to one another. Incidentally, the film was a story of estranged brothers.

We had estimated the time required for the march to reach Hind Mata and before the film ended, we came out. We joined the march opposite Surya Cinema, which was near Hind Mata. Our youths applauded our presence and shouted slogans. Within minutes, I met Bhagwat Jadhav, who was a distant relative. He used to visit my residence often and he had approached me for help in writing a play titled *Kirti Jyot* (Flame of Fame). The play had trick scenes along the lines of plays enacted by Navhind Balmitra Mandal. I told him that I wouldn't be able to help him because of my social commitments, which I considered more important. Bhagwat met me for a few seconds and vanished among the protestors. Overenthusiastic youths were still applauding the new participants – Dhasal, Sangare and Mahatekar and me.

When the march reached the BEST residential quarters, stones began falling on us from the terraces of the buildings. We were walking on the road with just banners stretched on sticks. The stone-pelting disrupted our march. Some of our youths threw back the stones in the direction they came from. Immediately, the po-

licemen, who were walking alongside, started beating up our boys with lathis. All hell broke loose with the protestors running helter-skelter. The police personnel drove away the protestors at the head and tail of the march and started beating up those at the centre. They also lobbed teargas shells. While the police were targeting the protestors, the shower of stones from the buildings continued on both sides of the road.

An officer approached me with a message that the local DCP wanted to talk to me. I was taken to the spot where Dhasal and Sangare were engaged in a heated argument with the DCP. I tried to speak to the DCP but he wouldn't listen. We were stuffed into a police van and driven away. When we realized that we were being taken to the (Bhoiwada) police station, we started shouting slogans. At the police station, we saw one of our lieutenants, Latif Khatik, being mercilessly beaten up by the police. Within minutes, several police vans transported our youths to the police station. We were taken to the first floor for interrogation. An officer approached us and started beating up Sangare and Dhasal, hurling abuses at them. Another officer pounced on me and started hitting me with his lathi. He slammed it on my rib cage with full force and continued thrashing me all over my body. A third officer joined them and took charge of Dhasal. There were three officers beating up three of us separately. There was someone beating Khatik, too.

One of those arrested was Prahlad Chendwankar, whose name came to be associated with the Dalit Panther accidentally. He had told the police that his name was Prahlad Chandrapurkar. He didn't want his real name to come on police records because he feared losing his job. Chendwankar later went on to boast that he was the founder of the Dalit Panther. He did not change his name on police records till the court gave its verdict on the case. Similarly, Dayanand Mhaske, who joined us very late, started boasting that he was the founder of the Dalit Panther. Success has many fathers, indeed.

We learnt that while the police had arrested me, Sangare and Dhasal, they had not been able to arrest Mahatekar. It appeared that Mahatekar had fled from the march, anticipating trouble. The po-

lice had confiscated banners from the agitators. The banners displayed slogans like "Dalit Panther Zindabad"; "Dhale, Dhasal, Pawar Zindabad"; "Release Dhale along with 193 Panthers"; "Victory to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar"; "Withdraw cases filed against Dalit Panthers"; "Down with Congress-Republican Alliance"; and "Down with Police Raj". The police booked 67 Dalit Panthers [Court Record (CR) No 43/74] and during the trial presented the banners in front of the court. The banners clearly revealed that the purpose of our march was to get Dhale released from jail, to protest against the high-handedness of the police, to demand withdrawal of cases filed against Dalit Panthers and condemn the Congress-Republican alliance. The slogans that the youths shouted were in tune with those displayed on the banners and there was no intention to provoke the Shiv Sena with the help of the communists. We had not uttered a single word on the Shiv Sena or the communists.

Attempts were made to pass off the march as being a joint venture between the Dalit Panther and the communists to ultimately take revenge of the murder of a communist leader Krishna Desai, allegedly masterminded by the Shiv Sena. It was all a figment of some people's imagination. We were actually more annoyed with the Congress party, because, as the ruling party, it was responsible for the state of affairs. Some newspapers had played mischief by speculating that the Dalit Panther would support the Congress in the by-election. They had got it completely wrong and our banners demonstrated very clearly our policy and the objective of the march. But some newspapers were deliberately spreading disinformation.

While the policemen resorted to lathi-charge and our boys began running for cover, a grinding stone was thrown from the terrace of a building. It fell on Bhagwat Jadhav's head. He collapsed, bleeding profusely. As his brother Sitaram Jadhav picked him up, the blood splattered the road. This enraged our boys. Bhagwat was rushed to hospital but he had already breathed his last. We lost one of our Panthers, but his death inspired many, who pledged to fight for the Dalit cause with renewed vigour.

We came to know about Bhagwat's death very late. All three of

us – Sangare, Dhasal and I – were together in custody and almost unconscious. From the manner in which we were beaten up we realized that something serious had happened. We expected Mahatekar to pay us a visit and tell us about the situation outside. But he did not show up, though he was free. The next day we saw his name in newspapers.

On 10 January, around 9pm, we were told that somebody wanted to meet us. We were taken to the cabin of C.D. Deo, the chief inspector of Bhoiwada Police Station. Socialist leader Mrinal Gore was sitting in the cabin. She spoke to us and inquired about the entire episode. We told her about the behaviour of the police personnel. She reprimanded the police officials and asked them to make arrangements for our medical treatment immediately. We refused, saying that we did not want any favour from the police. Gore's visit felt like an oasis in the desert. None of the Republican leaders had cared to call on us.

The next day we were taken to the court. From the enclosure meant for the accused persons, we could see some Republican lawyers known to us sitting in the courtroom. But they did not bother to even glance at us. Some of our activists were running from pillar to post to find lawyers to get us released. The Republican lawyers had also been approached, but they refused to appear for us in the court. They could have been following a diktat issued by their party.

A communist lawyer Kamlakar Samant came forward to help us. He not only took up our case without accepting any money, but also paid the court fee from his own pocket. He did not consider the legal profession as a means to make money. Rather, he used it to fulfil social commitments. In sharp contrast, Republican lawyers were not willing to take up our case even when we offered to pay their fees. Their political commitment may have restrained them; or, they may simply have been afraid of the Shiv Sena.

Of the 67 accused persons, Dhasal was rearrested for not presenting himself in the court in some other case. We had been charged under sections 135, 37 [e] of the Bombay Police Act and section 149 of the Indian Penal Code. However, neither the person

who killed Bhagwat Jadhav nor the police personnel who sided with the assailants were held accountable. This episode revealed the police department's bias against Dalits.

The Worli riots continued intermittently for three months. Worli was not a bastion of Dalit Panthers. We had a couple of activists like Ruke and Rangnath Kadam, but they were not very strong. But in the aftermath of the Worli riots, the Dalit community became polarized. Dalits, who were not our members, became our supporters. Dalit youths in Worli vented their ire against Republican leaders and did not allow them to set foot in the area. Besides, the residents fought communal forces and on some occasions, women used chilli powder to counter casteist mobs. They also did not stop their husbands and sons when they chose to fight back. Their driving force was Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. We earned goodwill and publicity to the extent that a letter addressed to simply "Dalit Panther, Mumbai" used to be delivered to me in Mumbai, a city with a population of more than 10 million. What had happened in Worli repeated itself in Naigaon, where Dalits stood their ground and fought back. The motivation was to fight people who hated Dr Ambedkar.

The Congress party emerged as a villain among Dalits. Sharad Pawar was turning a blind eye to the hooliganism of police personnel. Their high-handedness had Pawar's backing, for he was the minister of state for home. He could have stopped the riots and the injustice, but he did not. Probably, he wanted to create an atmosphere that worked against the chief minister. He was trying to kill two birds with a one stone – he wanted to crush Dalits and also create a situation unfavourable to the chief minister. He was definitely eyeing the chief minister's chair and was willing to do anything for it.

Bhagwat Jadhav's murder made the headlines on 11 January 1974. He was a budding playwright and an acquaintance. His brother S.R. Jadhav was active in the Dalit movement and associated with the Republican Aikya Kranti Dal despite being employed. He had also participated in our march with his brother on that fateful day. Unfortunately, he lost his younger brother, Bhagwat, when

that grinding stone fell on him. When Bhagwat was killed we were in police custody. Mahatekar named Bhagwat "Kranti Putra" (son of revolution).

Bhagwat's funeral procession drew thousands of people, including women. Dalits considered him a martyr. The police even tried to stop this massive funeral procession, but later yielded after a corporator of Jana Sangh, Wamanrao Parab, intervened. Here, too, the contribution of Republican leaders was zilch. While addressing the gathering, Parab said that Bhagwat's martyrdom would not go to waste and it should not. Govind Rokade, the head of the local Dalit Panther branch, endorsed his view. Among those who attended the funeral were Yuvak Kranti Dal's Gopal Dukhande; CPM's S.Y. Kolhatkar; Prahlad Kurne, a communist; Anil Barve, editor of the weekly *Ranangan*; CPI's P.L. Reddy; Ravba Chikte; Socialist Party's Jagannath Jadhav; Eknath Patil; Karandikar Guruji; Vilas Manjrekar; L.D. Kamble; Suresh Sawant; and Indutai Bansode.

Some Republican leaders did attend the funeral, but public sentiments were so strong that none of them was allowed to speak at the funeral and pay tribute to Bhagwat. One of them, Sumant Gaikwad, paid homage in the newspapers. S.G. Elwankar, general secretary, Samata Sainik Dal, demanded, in his address, a high-level judicial probe into the whole episode. Dhasal, Sangare and I could not attend the funeral as we were in prison. Later, Dalits organized a series of public meetings in different localities to pay homage to Bhagwat. One such meeting was held in Siddharth Nagar on 17 January, where I expressed hope that Bhagwat's death had triggered enthusiasm for a revolution and it would ultimately create a true democracy in India. Shivram Argaonkar, Narayan Manjrekar, Keshav Amberkar, Gunaji Manjalkar and Bhimsen Sagvekar also spoke at the meeting.

While Bhagwat's martyrdom had inspired Dalits, Republican leaders were vying with one another as supporters of Ramrao Adik, the Congress candidate in the by-election. They were issuing public statements in support. Republican leaders like R.S. Gavai, Bhausaheb Chavan, R.G. Kharat and Shantabai Dani were involved in Adik's election campaign with Congress leaders like P.K. Sawant

and Narendra Tidke. The Republican leaders were going around canvassing for Adik and addressing public meetings to urge people to vote for him. Some Republican leaders like Sumant Gaikwad, R.G. Ruke, G.D. Ghokshe, Sadanand Jadhav and P.L. Lokhande were telling Dalits that boycotting an election meant insulting Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, who had given them the right to vote. They were urging Dalits to cast their vote, instead letting it go to waste. P.N. Rajbhoj had also jumped on the bandwagon and started canvassing for Adik. The Mumbai unit chief of the Congress party made an all-out effort to secure Dalit votes, but people who had seen the Worli riots did not budge. They kept their word and boycotted the by-election to teach the ruling Congress party a lesson. We got what we wanted. Adik lost the by-election. Bhagwat's blood did not go to waste.

After Bhagwat's murder, another Dalit Panther, Ramesh Deorukhkar, was shot dead in Worli. Later, Deorukhkar's family shifted out of Worli. We, as an organization, began holding memorial services for both.

Yet another show of Republican unity

The defeat of Adik in the by-election for Mumbai South-Central Lok Sabha constituency meant the defeat of the most powerful political party in the country. Some of the Republican leaders had become servile to the Congress party and were canvassing for Adik, whereas we were asking voters to boycott the poll process, effectively defying the Republican leaders.

During the Worli riots, some Republican leaders had to face the ire of local residents. One of them was B.C. Kamble, who headed one of the RPI factions. Because he had not aligned himself with the Congress party, he presumed that the people would welcome him. Much to his surprise, the local residents hooted him out. When he visited the victims five days after the riots, they asked him whether he had been asleep. Likewise, P.N. Rajbhoj, the secretary of the Scheduled Caste Federation, was also booed out. The Republican leaders who visited Worli had to go around under heavy police protection when they realized that the people of Worli were really annoyed with them.

Republican leaders started to demonize us wher they discovered that their hold over Dalits was declining and the Dalit Panther was becoming increasingly popular. They were annoyed because none of them were allowed to speak at the funeral of Bhagwat Jadhav. They hoped to crush the Dalit Panther and move closer to the Congress party. R.S. Gavai, who headed a RPI faction, announced that his party had entered into an alliance with the Congress all over India. One of Gavai's aides, Shantabai Dani, while addressing a public meeting at Deolali in Nashik district on 13 January 1974,

had called for an eradication of the Dalit Panther, claiming that we were engineering a rift between people of different religions by burning the holy books. She also accused us of inciting violence and urged people to refrain from falling prey to our speeches.

The leaders of the Congress party were well aware that the appeals of Republican leaders would fall on deaf ears and came up with its plan to unite Dalits. Dalit votes used to be channelled to the Congress party candidates, but in Worli, the Dalits had responded favourably to our call for boycott, resulting in the defeat of Adik. This realization made the Congress leaders set up a committee to help victims of Worli-Naigaon riots in Naigaon. It was an all-party panel that included RPI factions, but it was ineffective. We had boycotted the committee.

A meeting of Republican leaders was called at the MLAs' hostel on 25 January. Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar presided over it. Several Republican leaders, including Rajabhau Khobragade, R.S. Gavai, B.C. Kamble and Ghanshyam Talwatkar, attended the meeting. After a lengthy discussion, the leaders arrived at a decision to unite all the Republican factions. The meeting had been convened at the behest of the Congress party leaders, who wanted a single, reunited RPI to channel all Dalit votes to the Congress party.

The leaders of Republican factions also decided to break ties with other parties after the unification. Hence, the alliances of different factions with the Congress party and the Shiv Sena stood terminated. This was a move to fool Dalits into believing that all the elders had come together, burying their hatchets. R.S. Gavai announced his resignation as the president of the Gavai faction and broke off ties with the Congress party. The leaders at the meeting also agreed to hold a unity rally the very next day, 26 January – India's Republic Day – at Chaityabhoomi. It can happen only with the Republican Party: the announcement of a rally just a day in advance. They believed that if all Republican leaders shared a dais on a Republic Day, millions of Dalits would turn up.

They were right. Emotional Dalits turned out in large numbers for the meeting. They were thrilled at the sight of all their senior leaders – Khobragade, Gavai, Kamble – sharing a single garland

of roses and pledging to serve them unitedly. Little did they know that the unification was a deceptive exercise to rein in the Dalit Panther movement. The Republican leaders knew that the unity would not last, but they had to deceive the people at the behest of the Congress party. On the day of the unity rally of Republian leaders, we were in Pune to address public meetings that had been planned well in advance. These meetings were held in Pune from January 26 to 28. While addressing meetings, Dhale, Dhasal and I lambasted the Republican leaders for cheating Dalits on the pretext of unity.

Before leaving for Pune, we had issued an open letter to Dalits and sent copies to various newspapers. *Nava Kaal* and *Maratha* published the entire letter. We had explained in the letter why we were staying away from the committee formed to provide relief to victims of the riots. The letter stated:

A committee has been appointed to provide assistance to the victims of Naigaon-Worli riots. The committee has been formed at the advice of Dadasaheb Rupavate and includes "Garibi Hatao" (Remove Poverty) parties like the Congress, Jana Sangh, Shiv Sena and Socialists. We have been excluded from the panel and those who were our detractors have come together. It is like rubbing salt into the wounds of Dalits, because ironically, those who had committed injustice are now pretending to help the victims. First they kill people and then offer compensation. Tomorrow, they will kill more people and offer more money as compensation. Will the issues of casteism and atrocities against Dalits be resolved in this manner? Hence, the purpose of this panel is to throw dust in the eyes of people. The police department always tried to suppress the militant Dalit Panther and engineered the riots in Worli, Naigaon and Parel. They disrupted our march that was taken out as a democratic means of protest and broke Raja Dhale's head and finger. The beastly government machinery claimed the life of Bhagwat Jadhav. Various Dalit Panther leaders like Namdeo Dhasal, Bhai Sangare and J.V. Pawar were brutally assaulted in the march and later, in the police lockup. Numerous Dalits, including women, suffered injustice. The same police machinery is feigning generosity

and coming forward in the form of a reiief committee led by senior police official S.S. Jog. The perpetrators of injustice are preparing to deliver justice. How can the police personnel, who stormed our houses and assaulted us, provide relief?

The Dalit Panther is not a registered political party as of now, but how our call to boycott swung the by-election reveals that it is a militant political force to reckon with. The political parties that were defeated in the poll are now pretending to help us. They haven't yet confiscated the hoardings targeting us that our opponents put up, but the police personnel have already pulled down and trampled the hoardings we put up. Accepting their help amounts to covering up atrocities against our women for Rs 5,000. This is a cruel joke and we condemn such help being rendered to the victims. We reject any such help and boycott this phoney committee. While we are fighting for freedom of expression, movement and organization, the offer of withdrawing 55 cases filed against us is meaningless. Who will ensure that this government puts an end to atrocities against Dalits? Our struggle will continue irrespective of whether the cases filed against us are withdrawn. This government that is committing atrocities against Dalits is trying to gag us through its machinery dealing with agrarian holdings. Besides, in some regions, by clamping curfew during our visits, we are being treated like externed criminals. In the Worli-Naigaon struggle, Dalits did not break any law. We did not loot any shop or hurl fireballs at any temple. We only expressed our opinion through our speeches. Yet 55 cases were filed against us. It proves the prejudice of the government against the Dalit Panther movement, which is fighting to seek justice for Dalits within the framework of the Constitution. We are not seeking recognition from the government because we have already got recognition from the people.

The Republican leaders, who, in the past 18 years, never bothered about providing relief to Dalits, are trying to rein in the Dalit Panther, which has been effective providing relief to Dalits over the past 18 months. These Republican leaders are now trying to impose their leadership on Dalits who have been polarized because of the emergence of the Dalit Panther. People should drive out such lead-

ers. The Republican leaders who broke away to form their own factions and allied with the Congress party are now calling themselves Ambedkarites. It is a joke that these people are calling others Naxalites. In 1938, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had urged youths to form a "Pran Yagna Sangh" [a group of people who offer themselves as a sacrifice] to fight atrocities. He had asked them to live like a tiger for a day, instead of living for 100 days like a goat. He had also said that political freedom had no meaning till social, economic, religious and cultural disparities existed in the country. He had not opposed any struggle against economic disparity, yet Dalit Panther is branded as a communist outfit because it raises economic issues. Are these people also going to brand Dr Ambedkar as a communist? They would not be able to tarnish the image of the Dalit Panther in the minds of the people by such smear campaigns. Dalits should remain vigilant against the propaganda that the Dalit Panther functions under the shadow of communists. Our political opponents are spreading such propaganda. Otherwise, why would these people who had teamed up with the Congress think of a Republican unity now?

In 1936, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had said that we are truly the "have-nots". Others become communists, but we are originally communists. The working class and Dalits are communists; they don't have to learn communism. But those who raise the walls of casteism among the have-nots forget to ensure equitable distribution of wealth and resources, which is also part of Buddhism. Those who take a stand against reservation for Dalits, and consider Dalits incompetent and always hate them, are saying that Dalits are communists. This is juvenile delinquency.

Our organization is standing on its own feet and we will continue to retain our independent existence. Is it not enough that in a single stroke we overpowered the Congress party, the Shiv Sena and the Republicans?

(Signed by) Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar

The unification of Republican factions was deceptive and bound

to fail. But its leaders wanted to take people into confidence. On 3 February 1974, they held a meeting on the terrace of Buddha-Bhushan Printing Press. Kamble stressed the need of a conference to thrash out the political policy of the united Republicans. He urged Dalits aged between 18 and 50 to enrol themselves in the Samata Sainik Dal. He also issued a warning to Dalit Panthers: Merge with the Republican Party of India and be prepared for talks with Republican leaders, he said. A march was scheduled for 20 February 1974 as a show of strength of united Republicans. The leaders who attended the meeting included N.M. Kamble, Sumantrao Gaikwad, R.G. Ruke, A.K. Gaikwad and D.P. Kamble. R.G. Kharat presided over it.

While the other Republican leaders were asking Dalit Panthers to merge with the united Republican party, R.S. Gavai was using foul language to criticize us. On 3 February 1974, while addressing a public meeting in Amravati he alleged that Dalit Panthers were agents of communists. Gavai himself had always been an agent of the Congress.

Isolated and criticized, we were working independently. We announced a march to the state secretariat on 5 February 1974 to protest against the assault on Dalits, hawkers, women and mill workers. I issued a statement saying that we were holding the march to protest against the increasing involvement of the police in hooliganism and atrocities. We took out the march as scheduled and Bhai Sangare and I led a delegation to meet chief minister Vasantrao Naik. At the meeting, we demanded that the police personnel involved in hooliganism during the riots be suspended.

Against the backdrop of Kamble asking us to join the Republicans, and Gavai taking the opposite stand, we held a public meeting at Matunga Labour Camp. I challenged Kamble to an open debate on 12 April 1974. I wrote a formal letter and sent it by post to Sumantrao Gaikwad, the RPI secretary. We had planned a debate between Raja Dhale and B.C. Kamble. The Republicans turned down the challenge. The letter returned to us with its acknowledgement receipt intact. I have preserved it as a souvenir.

A host of Republicans take to the streets

The Republican leaders held a march on 20 February 1974 to show that all Dalits rallied behind the reunified Republican Party and hence shunned the Dalit Panther. This march got an overwhelming response, like the rally held by the Republican leaders on 26 January 1974, when emotional Dalits had welcomed the reunification.

On February 19, the eve of the march, R.S. Gavai, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar, B.C. Kamble and Sumantrao Gaikwad had called a press conference in which they claimed that even members of the Dalit Panther were eager to join them. They claimed that Dalit Panthers had attended the preparatory meetings for the march. While this was a clever ploy, it was a blatant lie that our members wanted to join them. The leaders knew very well knew that newspapers would publish their claims on 20 February – the day of the march – and Dalit Panther leaders would have no time to react or rebut. The people would thus fall for the lie, even if just for a moment, that Dalit Panthers were part of the march.

Gavai went a step further and said that Republican leaders were ready for talks with the Dalit Panther leaders. He also warned that a supplementary entity in the form of the Dalit Panther would not be tolerated. We were shocked to hear these statements, because if they had been ready for talks, they would not have returned the letter we had written to them.

Newspaper editors were well aware of the theatrics of the Republican leaders, who were dancing to the tune of the Congress party. All major newspapers lambasted the Republican leaders for

the "sponsored" unification exercise. To counter the press' criticism, B.C. Kamble brought out two booklets, thousands of which were sold for Re 1 each. Kamble wanted to project himself as the "brain" of the RPI and score over other colleagues in the party. While the unification of Republican factions did not achieve anything worthwhile, it definitely helped Kamble do brisk business on those booklets.

The march taken out on 20 February was huge as people turned up in large numbers. Azad Maidan was overflowing with participants. Addressing the participants after the march, all Republican leaders pledged that there would be only one party, one flag, one policy and one path – the path shown by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Those who led the march included Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar, R.S. Gavai, B.C. Kamble, Ghanshayam Talwatkar, Sumantrao Gaikwad, Ashok Nile, Bhausaheb More, G.K. Mane, MLA Deshmukh, Bajirao Kamble, A.G. Shinde, Bhausaheb Chavan, Sheikh Kadar, R.G. Kharat, R.G. Ruke, C.H. Kharc, A.K. Gaikwad, Shantabai Dani and Pratibha Bachchav. The only top Republican leader missing was Rajabhau Khobragade. Speaking on the occasion, B. C. Kamble had a word of advice for Indira Gandhi: Dissolve the Congress party as Mahatma Gandhi had desired. It was ironical because even Republican activists themselves hadn't followed this advice. The police report on the march quoted Shantabai Dani's statement that the Dalit Panther was a social cancer and society had to weed it out.

The unification of the Republican factions turned out to be a damp squib. Shortly afterwards, the party split into two, then three and the factions kept increasing as each leader pulled out of it along with his followers. These were the leaders who had claimed that Dalits were united. It was not true. Dalits were divided and were supporting one or the other faction. Hence, the fragmentation was as easy as the unification. The leaders broke away, confident that their faithful followers would continue to support them. Their supporters, too, neither opposed the breakaway nor confronted their leaders.

Despite being on the receiving end of a barrage of criticisms,

we found that we had gained respectability in various quarters. For instance, various smaller communities felt the need of an organization like the Dalit Panther to fight the atrocities perpetrated against them. W.N. Madavi, a tribal MLA of the Congress party, called for the formation of an outfit called the "Lion Tribe" along the lines of the Dalit Panther. He said that such a militant outfit was necessary to fight for Tribals living in the remote hilly regions. He pointed out that about 14 lakh Tribals in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra were still not members of any of the Scheduled Tribes, because of which they had been deprived of reservation benefits. He asked Tribals to boycott elections as a pressure-building measure. However, since Madavi belonged to the ruling Congress party, his outbursts did not translate into action.

Madavi may not have been able to use boycott of elections as a weapon, but it was used elsewhere. Some leftist organizations boycotted assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. Leaders of some organizations from Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi went to Uttar Pradesh to urge voters to boycott the elections. These leaders were predominantly leftists, youths, workers and farmers.

On 14 April, Republican leaders celebrated the birth anniversary of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar at Chaityabhoomi as usual. Speaking on the occasion, Rajabhau Khobragade lamented that the promises made by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Finance Minister Yeshwantrao Chavan and Dalit leader Jagjivan Ram regarding justice for the poor had not been fulfilled. He pointed out that the Congress party was winning elections on the support of Dalits and Muslims, but it was ignoring their welfare. He added that in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress won the polls on the support of Muslims and Dalits, but the reins of power continued to be in the hands of Brahmins. Similar meetings were held at Cooperage and Dr Ambedkar College, Wadala, where Republican leaders took stock of the situation in the entire country.

Meanwhile, on behalf of the Dalit Panther, Namdeo Dhasal issued a lengthy statement warning the government against using the gun at protestors. He stated that a democracy could not be the rule of the gun. He further said that we would raise security squads to

combat atrocities inflicted by casteist forces and the government. Since the workers' and our woes were similar, he added, we would join hands with them to fight the government. He called upon the communists to support this venture. Citing a firing incident on Tribals in Nandurbar, he said that the ways the government swung into action in Nandurbar and Worli were similar and had to be tackled collectively. Like the former British government that indulged in "divide and rule" policy and incited communal riots between Hindus and Muslims, Dhasal added, the existing government was using the gun to suppress the poor, the unemployed, workers and Dalits. The statement spelt out Dhasal's ideology.

Agitation against unemployment

The Indian Constitution has granted reservations to backward castes and tribes in education and jobs to bring them on a par with the well-to-do class. However, reservations were never implemented effectively, the reason being that Manu, the Hindu lawmaker, had influenced the minds of officials entrusted with their implementation. The typical justification for the backlog of reservation was that deserving candidates were not available. The fact was that there was no one reviewing the process of appointments in the reserved categories. Neither the Congress party nor the Republican parties had any means to monitor employment of backward classes. The bureaucracy had become thick-skinned. The only exception in history was the rule of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj in the princely state of Kolhapur before India became independent.

By the first half of 1974, the Dalit Panther had spread to all levels of society and was considered a force to reckon with. The mention of the Dalit Panther unsettled even the government officials. In one of our monthly meetings, we took up the issue of unemployment among Dalit youths. Most of the reserved positions in the Maharashtra government were filled. The central government jobs though were still not reserved for Buddhists. An agitation to demand reservation for Dalits who converted to Buddhism had been going on for years but it had accomplished nothing. Dalit youths, especially those born after 1956 (when Dr Ambedkar and his followers converted to Buddhism), were in a quandary.

We came up with a plan to launch an agitation on 29 March 1974, both at the employment exchanges across Maharashtra and

at the state secretariat. It was Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar who had created the employment exchanges when he was the labour member in the Viceroy's Executive Council. An employment exchange was meant to be a place where jobseekers could register and where the employers would come to with their manpower needs. However, employment exchanges had become centres of corruption and Dalit youths had become the victims.

The main employment exchange office was in the Ballard Pier area. I wrote a letter on 21 March to the head of the employment exchange, Janardhan Jadhav, seeking details of the number of candidates the exchange had recommended for employment in various government departments over the previous financial year. I had also sought information on the number of vacancies in Class I to Class IV posts in various government departments, category-wise (general, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes). I had asked the authorities to provide the information by 28 March or else face our agitation. The head of the employment exchange did not even bother to acknowledge my letter, leave aside providing the information I had sought. We planned to go ahead with our agitation. Since the protests were to be held all over Maharashtra at the district headquarters, we also published a booklet on the issue. Avinash Mahatekar wrote the booklet titled "The Dalit Panther's onslaught on the smuggled economic structure".

On the day of the agitation, 50 youths led by Dadabhau Salve entered the Employment Exchange in Ballard Pier separately to avoid being stopped by the security staff. Once they were all inside the office, they started shouting slogans against the government. It created a commotion among the staff and the police. We had instructed the youths not to cause any inconvenience to jobseekers visiting the exchange and not to engage in vandalism. They shouted slogans till additional police personnel took them into custody and released them after a few hours. Simultaneously, I, along with Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar, led a march to the state secretariat. We came to know about the disturbance at the employment exchange when some of the police personnel around us were rushed to Ballard Pier.

Subsequently, the officials of the employment exchange replied to my letter on 11 April, expressing their inability to furnish the details that I had asked for. After receiving the letter, I met Jadhav in his office. He suggested that I should write a letter to the chief minister and pointed to Sachivalaya – the state secretariat – where I would be able to get the data promptly. He told me that there was already a system in place in the Sachivalaya to collect statewide data.

Meanwhile, while discussing the topic with police officials, I was told that the data could be collected department-wise. The data that I got from the police establishment shocked me. In 1974, there were 18,275 police constables and 1,646 officers in the Mumbai police force. Though the statistics showed that 15 per cent reserved posts for Scheduled Castes and seven per cent for Scheduled Tribes had been filled, these figures were misleading because they pertained to the lower-grade posts. The maximum appointments were in the fourth grade, which was the lowest. The police establishment had been boasting about implementing the reservation policy and filling 22.5 per cent of the posts with Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes candidates. There were some police sub-inspectors from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but their percentage was not 15 and 7.5 as stipulated. The reservation policy had not been implemented in the higher-grade posts from Inspector to Superintendent. Yes, the police establishment was fulfilling the reservation policy by appointing 22.5 per cent of people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes but only in the lower-grade posts.

I collected the data and met Chief Minister Vasantrao Naik, who also held the home portfolio. I submitted a memorandum to him. He was known to be a stone-faced man, but on reading the data he was visibly surprised. As the home minister, he was directly responsible for this situation. He appeared to be touched by the reality, but he was helpless because of the sugar lobby (of politically powerful Maratha feudal lords in rural Maharashtra who ran sugar mills). His hands were tied because he was occupying his chair courtesy of the sugar lobby's support. He had his own limitations, but in front of us he scribbled a remark on the memorandum, asking

officials to get the facts checked and fill the reserved posts if necessary. When the order from the home department reached top police officials, including the Mumbai police commissioner, it caused a commotion. I also sent a copy to the head of the employment exchange.

Officials were not prepared to implement the reservation policy, which extended to out-of-turn promotions, because it meant some of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe officials serving under them would reach higher positions and become their bosses. They found a way out. They created hurdles in promoting the staff from these backward classes by citing their incompetence. The method they employed was to pass adverse remarks in the annual confidential reports of the backward-classes personnel. We were following it up and Naik, too, seemed to be enthusiastic. Unfortunately, before the process could be completed, Naik had to step down from his chair. The issue was put on the backburner.

Years later, when Vasantdada Patil became the chief minister and Nasikrao Tirpude his deputy, the issue was revived. Tirpude had a grip on the administration and was particular about implementing the reservation policy. During his tenure, he ensured that the backlog of appointments and promotions was cleared. To counter the trick played by upper-caste officials to deny promotions, Tirpude sent out an order saying that the years of service would be the sole criterion, thus eliminating the adverse confidential reports of candidates. It benefited the SC and ST staff, some of whom jumped to higher posts and became bosses of their former bosses. For instance, if a police sub-inspector had served the requisite number of years, he was promoted directly to police inspector, instead of an intermediary post of "selection grade" inspector.

Because of Naik and Tirpude's efforts, and our consistent follow-up, police personnel of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were appointed and promoted all over Maharashtra. If two cadets had passed out from the police academy in the same year, the SC and ST cadet became the boss of the other in due course because of the reservation policy. This produced resentment among upper-caste police officials, who felt discriminated against because

of their caste. Some SC and ST candidates who had reached the level of the assistant commissioner of police were promoted as deputy commissioners in the Indian Police Service cadre. Few, though, are aware of the Dalit Panther's role in their recruitment and promotion.

This formula first implemented in the Mumbai police commissionerate was later replicated in all departments of the Maharashtra government and also in various departments of the central government. It included the banking sector. Until 1971-72, candidates from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were unofficially kept away from recruitment. After 1974, the Dalit Panther stepped up pressure through correspondence and agitations, and Dalit author Shankarrao Kharat intervened – all of which resulted in a change in the recruitment situation. The number of bank employees increased and many organizations of bank employees were formed. There were, of course, some squabbles and factionalism, of which I am a witness, being the first president of a welfare association in the Indian banking sector.

Vasantdada's bamboos can't keep out Panthers

In April 1974, the Dalit Panther added yet another feather in its cap. We compelled the prime minister of India to change her designated route while on a visit to Pune. Had she not changed her route, she would not have been able to attend the programme on her itinerary and brought tremendous embarrassment to her party that was in power in Maharashtra.

The Pune University, which was celebrating its 25th anniversary, was going to confer an honorary doctorate on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 6 April 1974. When her visit to Pune was announced, several organizations, including the communists, began planning agitations to coincide with her visit. The Congress party made preparations to pre-empt any agitation that could embarrass her. All of its senior leaders, including the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee chief Vasantdada Patil, took to the streets and instructed party workers to carry sticks while heading to the venue for the function.

It was a direct challenge to us because Namdeo Dhasal had already announced an agitation in Pune to draw prime minister's attention to the plight of Dalits. Dhasal was infuriated with the announcement of Congress leaders and asked Dalit Panthers to come for the march with sticks, iron rods and hockey sticks to fight the goons of the Congress party. He also warned the government and the Congress party that in case of any untoward incident, they would be responsible.

Dhasal's statement was first published in newspapers in Pune. Then he came to Mumbai and circulated it among the local newspapers. He came to me and said that we had to organize an agitation during Indira Gandhi's visit to Pune and sought help from Dalit Panthers of Mumbai. I thought he wanted me to visit some of our chhawnis and invite our members to Pune.

As usual, he hired a taxi, without considering whether we had enough money in our pockets. He instructed the taxi driver to take us to Kemps Corner. I used to work in the office of Bombay Telephone at Kemps Corner and knew that an office of Kamlakar Subhedar's Samajwadi Yuva Jan Sabha was located there. I thought that Dhasal probably wanted Subhedar to send his youths for the Pune agitation.

However, before we could reach there, Dhasal asked the taxi driver to turn into a lane that led to an upmarket residential locality. He took me into a plush apartment, asking the taxi driver to wait for us. Before I could gauge the purpose of our visit, he had introduced me to a Gujarati man and told him that Dalit Panthers were organizing an agitation against the government. Dhasal obviously wanted financial help from that person. He took Dhasal to another room. Within moments, Dhasal emerged from the room with a beaming face. He asked the taxi driver to take us to Colaba. I understood that Dhasal had taken money from that person and my only relief was that I was not required to pay for the taxi ride.

In Colaba, there was almost a repeat of this first brief stopover, the only difference being that the person whom we met was a high court lawyer as was evident from the nameplate on the door. Dhasal had approached the lawyer for aid, not legal but financial. I don't know how much money these two donors paid Dhasal, but he not only paid for our taxi ride but also an advance for travel by taxi from Mumbai to Thaksen Padale's residence in Pune the next day.

On April 6, Dhasal and I went to a Pune suburb, prepared for the protest and any eventuality of lathi-charge, tear-gassing, firing and imprisonment, which may arise. During the agitations, Dhasal always kept me by his side. We went to the Simla Office area accompanied by Thaksen Padale, who was a civic leader, and former

mayor Shantaram Divekar.

As scheduled, Indira Gandhi arrived at the airport in a special aircraft called "Rajhans". Governor Ali Yavar Jung, chief minister Vasantrao Naik and his wife Vatsala welcomed her. A convoy was ready to escort her over a distance of 12 km from the airport to the university. There was heavy police deployment along the route. As it had been planned, she travelled in a closed car till Band Garden and then onwards, in an open car, to wave at the crowds lining both sides of the road.

While she was passing Sancheti Hospital, Dalit Panthers started shouting anti-government slogans that mentioned the atrocities against Dalits, especially the women. Immediately, going by Vasantdada Patil's instructions, some goons with bamboos in their hands attacked Dalit Panthers. There was commotion and police began a lathi-charge against our youths. Soon, the situation went out of control and the police lobbed tear-gas shells. Angry with the attack, Dalit Panthers tried to stop the convoy by blocking its path. By the time the motorcade reached the meteorological office, the nervous police diverted the convoy via Range-Hills area towards the university, where the ceremony was conducted.

People who had lined up along the route to get a glimpse of "Indira Mata" were disappointed. What they got instead was a thrashing from the police and the state reserve police personnel. Most of them were slumdwellers, like a 60-year-old woman, Baidabai. One person, Nana Sitaram Waghmare, was pulled out of his house and beaten up. P. Subbarao and his wife were having their meal, when some policemen entered the house and ransacked it, throwing away utensils. The worst affected area was Kasba Peth, where most of the shops were open despite ominous signs of violence erupting.

When police dispersed the mob near the All India Radio station, the goons entered Kasba Peth and went berserk for about three hours. They were irked because Indira Gandhi had to change her route because of us. The hooligans pelted stones at shops and vehicles in the area. They came with their bamboo sticks and threatened us, apparently under the direction of Congress leaders. However, when we refused to yield to their threats, they got cold

feet. After the ceremony at the university, where she was conferred the honorary doctorate, Indira Gandhi left for Hyderabad under heavy police escort.

Namdeo Dhasal had led the agitation in Pune and hundreds of Dalit Panthers had responded favourably. There were other leaders too, including Shantaram Divekar, Jaidev Gaikwad, Anil Kamble, Sada Bhosale and Vijay Jadhav. The agitation revealed that the Dalit Panther had gained enough strength to compel a prime minister on an official visit to change her travel route. It made us an aggressive and powerful pressure group, socially and politically. That day, Indira Gandhi witnessed the ire of Dalits and chief minister Vasantrao Naik realized the incompetence of his party and his government in Maharashtra.

According to police reports, speaking at the silver jubilee function of the Pune University, Indira Gandhi urged people to stop wasting their energy and productivity on agitations.

How the cracks began to appear

Stories of a split in the Dalit Panther started appearing in 1974, but discontent had been simmering since 1972. In December 1972, when I visited *Nava Kaal*'s office to deliver a press release, I bumped into Manohar Rupavate. He was a railway employee who had links with Republican leaders and activists. He worked with Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar's aide, J.B. Gambre; Bapusaheb Kamble's lieutenant, Motling; and writers Daya Pawar and Bhausaheb Adsul. Rupavate also knew Bhausaheb Ghangale, who used to distribute the weekly *Prabuddha Bharat*, and had come in touch with a lot of people. When I met Rupavate, he asked me to join him for a cup of tea. I agreed and we went to a Hindu restaurant on Khadilkar Road. After ordering tea, he asked me whether a rumour he had heard about a split in the Dalit Panther was true. He had obviously heard about it from the group of railway employees. I was stunned but feigned ignorance and replied that rumours were just rumours.

I went down memory lane to recollect some incidents ever since the first rally of the Dalit Panther on 9 July 1972. Some of our members had printed handbills for our public meetings in Mumbai. These handbills referred to Raja Dhale as "founder, Dalit Panther", which annoyed Namdeo Dhasal. He expressed his displeasure to me. When it wasn't corrected, he came to me one day presuming that I had drafted the handbill. I tried to console him. I told him that indeed him and I were founders, but because of Dhale's controversial article in *Saadhanaa*, Dalit Panther was getting publicity, and that there was nothing objectionable about it. Dhasal's objec-

tion indicated that he was jealous of Dhale, for which Dhale was not responsible. Dhasal could not openly oppose Dhale because newspapers were giving wide publicity to Dhale. Dhasal was hurt that Dhale was getting more publicity than him.

In October 1972, Republican leaders established the Anyay Atyachar Nivaran Kruti Samiti – a committee to tackle injustice. I was one of the five secretaries on the committee. In one of the meetings, I demanded that the committee condemn the government for its inability to curb atrocities against Dalits. The other members rejected my demand and I quit the committee. Arjun Dangle remained in the committee and severed his ties with the Dalit Panther. Dangle and Dhasal were of the same mindset and both loved communism. Eventually, Dhale sacked Dangle from the Dalit Panther, much to the chagrin of Dhasal.

On 21 October 1972, Dhale said that he was going to launch a new Ambedkarite social organization during the Sarfare lecture series in Apna Bazar, in which he was one of the speakers. Dhasal did not say anything then. But the following day, after Dhale's announcement was reported in the newspapers, he met me to ask whether the Dalit Panther was not an Ambedkarite organization. He questioned the need for a new Ambedkarite organization.

These were two examples of how the rift developed between Dhale and Dhasal at the beginning itself. Before these incidents, there was no bitterness between them. In fact, Dhale loved Dhasal's poetry. Once, Baburao Bagul had asked Dhasal to trash one of his poems, *Manasane* (by man), but Dhale had opposed it and had it published in the magazine *Vidroh*. Till September 1972, they were ideologically united. On 5 September 1972, Dhale wrote the article titled "Pratike Shrestha Ki Manoos" (Are symbols superior or humans?) in *Maharashtra Times*, while Dhasal gave an interview to *Nava Kaal* on 28 September 1972, on the same topic. His answers and Dhale's article showed they were on the same wavelength.

Yet, there was another incident that showed differences had cropped up between the two. Kedu Gangurde had organized a public meeting at Sewree BDD Chawls. The meeting was held against the backdrop of street-fights between Shiv Sena members and Dalit

Panthers. Youths present at the meeting were shouting slogans hailing Dhale and condemning Shiv Sena. Some slogans also hailed Dhasal and me, but most of them were hailing Dhale. When Dhale was being hailed, Dhasal looked at me and laughed. I knew that though he was laughing, he was hurt within. Eventually, Dhasal started organizing his own programmes and shifted his base to Pune. Though it looked like we were working together for the Dalit Panther, we were not united.

The most important manifestation of this disunity was at the public burning of the *Gita*. I had invited Dhasal orally, conveyed the message through other people and also sent a telegram, but he did not come to Mumbai for the programme. The public burning of the *Gita* was a Dalit Panther event, not Dhale's private function. Dhasal was always suspicious. Even when we would sit in a restaurant near my office, he used to suspect the man sitting at the next table to be a policeman in plainclothes. While walking on the road, he used to say that a passerby was a policeman or a Shiv Sena worker. He had some ailments, but at times, he used to clutch and spread his fingers, worried that he had been infected with leprosy. His behaviour was very strange: Whenever we met the chief minister in his chamber, he would praise him; after coming out of the chamber, he would abuse the chief minister.

He didn't reserve this behaviour just for the politicians. Once we had gone to meet Narayan Surve, the poet, at his residence at Chinchpokli. Dhasal was all praise for Surve and addressed him as "sir". When we came out of the building, he started abusing Surve and his political links. I knew about Dhasal's erratic behavior and never used to take him seriously. He could suddenly change his mind and start dancing to someone's tune. His unpredictable behaviour had surprised many, though his image engraved in the hearts of youths was that of a fiery orator and a veteran poet.

If he had controlled himself and followed a code of conduct, the Dalit Panther would not have been divided. He had assumed that he was free to behave as he pleased. If he had been merely a poet, his eccentricity would have been accepted. But he was in public life and millions of youths looked up to him as their idol for so-

cial change. He forgot that the behaviour of a leader influences his followers and that they observe their icon closely and emulate him. Dhasal's appeal eventually fizzled out and people used to whisper their displeasure. While visiting a locality in a taxi, he would ask local youths to pay his fare, often catching the poor locals unawares. We started keeping a donation box in some of our divisions to raise funds to cover such expenses and avoid this situation.

Dhasal never used to trust anyone and hence very few people trusted him. The initial craze for him had waned. He used to extract money from ministers, politicians and even writers. His knack of collecting money had attracted some youths, who always used to be around him. He used to feed them and even spend money on their clothing. One of them was an activist named Chavan from Pune. Chavan, who addressed Dhasal as "Dada", used to misappropriate money. He had pocketed the money I had given for the first issue of *Vidroh*. People would consider Dhasal a rebel as along as they were not directly in touch with Dhasal, but once they came close to him, they would find him repulsive.

While behaving in this manner, he was also provoking his colleagues. For instance, all of us had asked him not to send his volume of poetry *Golpitha* for a government award because we felt it was wrong to accept an award from the people we were fighting. We had told him that *Golpitha* was all-time great poetry that should not be limited by the tag of the best volume published in a particular year. However, he did not listen and submitted it to the government jury through Narayan Athawale. *Golpitha* received the "Keshavsut Award" on 25 April 1974.

Established litterateurs had monopolized the prestigious literary magazine *Satyakatha* and used to consider the magazine as the benchmark of good literature. Some youths led by Raja Dhale had burnt the magazine in protest. We had told Dhasal to refrain from writing for *Satyakatha*, because we wanted to bust the myth that its recognition was necessary for any literary piece in Marathi to be considered great literature. However, Dhasal defied us and started writing poems for *Satyakatha* and made it a point to brag about it to any person he met. He got carried away at the thought

of established writers. Once, when he visited Kolhapur for a meeting of Dalit Panthers, he bought *kolhapuri chappals* (specially crafted leather footwear of Kolhapur) for *Satyakatha*'s executive editor Ram Patwardhan and publisher S.P. Bhagwat. Dhasal's revolutionary activities were rudderless.

While Dhasal was receiving flak for his behaviour, several newspapers started publishing stories to make matters worse. Dhasal wrote articles saying that he was a hardcore communist, Babasaheb Ambedkar followed only the beaten track, the Constitution was not written by Ambedkar alone, etc – all of which served only to increase the suspicion about him and the confused youths. By the time he would wake up to clarify, the damage had been done. Some newspapers hailed him while others criticized him. Whenever our members confronted us with questions about Dhasal, we would tell them that it was a smear campaign against us by some newspapers. We were trying to protect Dhasal and hence the unity of our organization.

However, some powerful forces, which wanted to drive a wedge between the members of a militant organization, were at work. They succeeded in overpowering Dhasal and he accepted servility. He even went to the extent of composing poems for communist leader S.A. Dange's 75th birthday.

After the march of 14 August 1973, many communist leaders began milling around Dhasal. Sunil Dighe had already made a hero out of him. Others like Anil Barve, Sudhir Bedekar, Subhash Sarin, Jayant Gadkari, Kamlakar Samant, Nilofer Bhawat, Hiraman Pagare, Bal Khairmode and Nishikant Waghmare followed suit. Their only job was to project Dhasal's leftist leanings and thus drive a wedge between Dalit Panthers.

Vasant More-Dhamankar's booklet

Vasant More was an employee in the postal department of the Government of India. Since his job came with bounds he couldn't overstep, he had assumed the name Vasant Dhamankar for his social activism. He was associated with Republican Kranti Dal during 1971-72. He was anguished over the fragmentation of the Republican Party of India and was active in the Ambedkarite movement. Had he not been a government employee, he could have been a good political orator. He used to write and circulate pamphlets and public statements of the Republican Kranti Dal.

We got acquainted when he was trying to unite all the RPI factions. His simple lifestyle, soft-spoken ways, incisive analysis of politics and mastery of the Marathi language impressed me. We became friends. On 26 January 1974, when RPI factions announced their reunification at a public meeting in Chaityabhoomi, the Republican Kranti Dal also merged with the united RPI. He was sceptical about the unity among the Republicans, so he met me and joined the Dalit Panther. Though he was staying in a BIT chawl in Saat Rasta, he started frequenting the Siddharth Vihar hostel, where Raja Dhale used to live. He also started accompanying Ramdas Athawale on his tours.

Since he was campaigning for the unity of RPI factions, he wrote a booklet, *Non-Republican Leaders, Poor Masses and the Dalit Panther*. Ramdas Athawale, the communication minister of Dalit Panthers, published it and was priced at Rs 2 each. More dedicated the booklet to martyr Bhagwat Jadhav and Dhale wrote the foreword titled, "The Dalit Panther's Warning to Treacherous Lead-

ers". The booklet was released on 6 October 1974 at the BIT chawl in Saat Rasta. Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar, Arun Kamble, S.R. Jadhav and I were present at the release function. The gist of the book was printed on the invitation card of the book release ceremony: "The biggest stumbling block in the path of crores of Dalits, especially the Buddhist brethren, is the imposition of the spineless leadership of irresponsible, treacherous, non-Republican leaders and their opportunist, skilful hirelings. These leaders betrayed the followers of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar – his thoughts, movement and activities – and ruined as well as devalued Babasaheb's political party… In the future, people will not dance to the tune of these leaders. Rather, they are thinking of accosting and externing these leaders."

Dhale released the booklet as planned and Bhai Sangare, Arun Kamble and I spoke on the occasion. Phulpagar presided over the ceremony. The booklet threw light on RPI's fragmentation and was critical about Gavai, Khobragade and B.C. Kamble. It was the most important after "Who upset the nest of Republican Party?", the booklet that remained the talk of the town for several days.

Dhamankar's untimely death

Vasant Dhamankar attended the first Dalit Panther convention. It was held in Nagpur from 23-24 October 1974. After the convention, he chose to remain in Nagpur for a few days. S.R. Jadhav and Suresh Sawant, too, stayed back with him. Dhamankar told me about this plan when I asked him about it just as I was leaving for Mumbai. He also asked me to inform his wife about his delayed return. Baban Lavhatre told me that Dhamankar had stayed back to do the accounts of the convention and to write to newspapers about the convention.

The hearing of a case against the Dalit Panther activists of Nagpur for protesting against Indira Gandhi was scheduled in the Nagpur court for 28 October 1974. It was slated for hearing in Judge Bodhankar's court and our lawyers were V.V. Bansod and K.V. Umare. While delivering the verdict, Judge Bodhankar acquitted all our activists. They heaved a sigh of relief. It was necessary to convey the news about the judgment to newspapers so that all activists came to know about it. Dhamankar wrote a press release and delivered it to all newspapers and the All India Radio. On that day, Harish Vanjari arranged lunch for the activists from Mumbai. Vanjari was a dedicated activist of the Dalit Panther and being a railway employee, he was usually involved in our activities behind the scenes. If his economic condition were satisfactory, he would have resigned from the railway department and capably led Dalit Panthers.

When Baban Bansod and Baban Lavhatre were waiting at Vanjari's house, Vinod Dongre came running to share the news that

Vasant Dhamankar had met with an accident and died. Dongre was breathless as he told the activists that Dhamankar had been run over by a truck on Kamthi Road. The accident had taken place opposite Dr Rajendra Patil's house at the junction of Kamthi Road and Chalks Colony. Dhamankar was on a bicycle and the truck carrying sand had rammed into him from behind, killing him on the spot. The black asphalt road had become red with his blood. The news of his death spread in Nagpur city like wildfire. The accident had taken place at 3.50pm and within minutes protestors took to the road to demand the arrest of the truck driver, Dhanraj. The police tried to hide the driver, to shield him from the wrath of the mob. Subsequently, the local police handed him over to the police commissionerate for his safety. If the angry youths had laid their hands on the driver, he would have been torn to shreds. The local police conducted the panchanama (the preliminary investigation) and collected the body parts strewn on the road and sent them for post-mortem. Dr Madhukar Wasnik assisted Lavhatre in dealing with this situation.

Baban Lavhatre conveyed the news of Dhamankar's death to those in Mumbai, first to Athawale and then to Dhale. I was in jail and unaware of it. The dead body needed to be taken to Mumbai. The only option was by air but it was very expensive. While the issue of collecting money to meet the expenses was being discussed, people started buying copies of the booklet written by Dhamankar, *Non-Republican Leaders, Poor Masses and the Dalit Panther*. Although the booklet was priced at Rs 2, people started giving at least Rs 100 for a copy, placing the currency notes besides his mortal remains. Hundreds of copies had been brought to Nagpur for sale. After all the necessary formalities, Dhamankar's dead body was flown to Mumbai. The contribution of the people from Nagpur, including Dr Wasnik, Harshkumar Waghmare and Baban Bansod, in making the arrangements was immense. Baban Lavhatre, S.R. Jadhav and Suresh Sawant accompanied Dhamankar's mortal remains to Mumbai.

A huge crowd of about six to seven lakh people had gathered for the funeral. They were not just Dalit Panthers but from all sec-

tions of society. It was a rare congregation in those days when there were no mobile phones, landlines were few and news were broadcast on radio and television only a couple of times during the day. Those who were attended the funeral included Baban Lavhatre, S.R. Jadhav, Suresh Sawant, Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, M.D. Gaikwad, Anant Bachhav, Dadabhau Salve, M.S. Andherikar, Ramdas Athwale and Dayanand Mhaske. I was in jail.

Those days, I was required to attend the hearing of a case pertaining to Worli-Naigaon riots, in which I was the Accused No 2 and Namdeo Dhasal, Accused No 1. The case had been registered against 70 Dalit Panthers and the trial was being conducted in the court of Magistrate Kale in the Naigaon court. Since the courtroom was small, many youths had to stand outside. Since I was the Accused No 2, I had to be present inside the courtroom. Dhasal always used to be absent, much to the annoyance of the magistrate. The court would order me to ensure that for the next hearing, Dhasal was present. I used to request Dhasal again and again, but in vain. Finally, one day, the magistrate threatened to have Dhasal's mother arrested and sent to custody till he appeared in the court. This threat worked and Dhasal appeared for a few hearings.

I remained absent for one hearing as I had to go to Nagpur for preparations of our convention. Dhasal, too, was absent for the hearing. This happened to be the time when the schism in the Dalit Panther was widening. I was absent for the first time since the case came up for hearing and was expecting the court to pardon me. It wasn't to be. Magistrate Kale issued a non-bailable warrant, considering our absence a contempt of court. It meant that my earlier bail had been cancelled and I needed a stronger surety. I was arrested as soon as I arrived in Mumbai from Nagpur and sent to custody in Jacob Circle jail. I could have been kept at Bhoiwada Police Station lock-up, but magistrate Kale was angry and it showed.

While I was in jail, my brother met Bhai Sangare. Actually, Sangare should have found a guarantor to have me bailed. I had arranged bail for many Dalit Panthers earlier, but Sangare did not make any effort to bail me. He expressed his inability and told my

wife that she had to do it herself. Then my father-in-law, wife and elder brother ran from pillar to post to arrange for my bail, because the condition was that the guarantor had to be a taxpayer. My father-in-law met our local corporator from Jan Sangh, Wamanrao Parab, who was waiting for such an opportunity. When I came to know of it, I sent a message through a police constable against involving Parab in my bail. I did not want any favour from him. The next day when my wife came to meet me, I gave her the address of M.D. Gaikwad. Sangare had not made any effort to arrange for my bail because I had not given him money for travel and appointed him to the post he wanted.

M.D. Gaikwad tried to get me a guarantor. He himself was willing to be the guarantor, but an official at Bhoiwada Police Station, PSI Sohni, rejected his offer. Sohni was from a Scheduled Caste and his father was an active Dalit Panther who wanted us to establish a Dalit Panther Trade Union in Tata Oil Mill. Dhale and I told him about our ties with his father, but the father and the son weren't on good terms. His father suspected that he was a Shiv Sena supporter and hence he hated Dalit Panthers. PSI Sohni made it harder for me to get bail. Finally, Gaikwad presented a guarantor who was not just an income taxpayer but also a property taxpayer. After checking the documents, PSI Sohni had no alternative but to grant me bail after a week in custody.

I had come to know about Dhamankar's death while I was in custody. I had sent a letter to Sangare to arrange for my parole to attend the funeral. Sangare did not lift a finger. If he had made some effort, it would have been significant. Even if Sangare and Mahatekar had requested for my release for a few hours to attend the funeral, it would have been granted. I was closely acquainted with Dhamankar. He was also a distant relative and his father-in-law was a friend of my brother. His brother-in-law Uttam Kamble (later Uttam Jahagirdar) was my colleague. I had helped Dhamankar in editing and selling his *Antarmukh* (Introspective) magazine. Once, we came to know about some domestic quarrel in Dhamankar's house because of which he used to take leave frequently. Dhale's brother Jaikumar was his friend. Dhale was working for a pharma-

ceutical firm in Mumbai Central and Dhamankar used to visit him. Through Dhale, I had conveyed a message to Dhamankar to do his job properly, but it did not help.

If I had attended Dhamankar's funeral, newspapers would have been been given prominence to me. Sangare and Mahatekar did not want that. It was an indication of the decline of a fraternal feeling within our movement. I could not attend the funeral of a well-behaved, dedicated worker who was an expert in the Marathi language. When the funeral procession was proceeding towards the cemetery, I was behind bars, trying to imagine his face. Thousands of people were in the procession but I was alone in the jail, unable to attend. I was in tears and offered my last "Jai Bhim" to Dhamankar from prison.

Several condolence meetings were held in the Mumbai and Nagpur regions. In one such meeting held in Bhimwadi, Santa Cruz (West), M.D. Tamhanekar, a journalist, said that the booklet that Dhamankar had written had not only challenged non-Republican leaders but also the Dalit Panthers, who must take on the responsibility of creating the true Republican Party and its leadership. In the same meeting, Dalit Panthers did not like Sumantaro Gaikwad's speech, but they remained calm and patient. Among those who paid tributes to Dhamankar included Raja Dhale and me, along with the activists of Boudhhajan Panchayat Samiti – R.G. Ruke, J.B. Gambre, Anantrao Kamble, A.R. Sawant and Raja Jadhav.

The thing that caused me great anguish was that I was not able to attend the funerals of both the martyrs – Bhagwat Jadhav and Vasant Dhamankar. During Bhagwat's funeral I was arrested for the Worli-Naigaon riots and was in custody of the Bhoiwada police, while during Dhamankar's funeral, too, I was in Jacob Circle jail for failing to attend a hearing. I bade them my last "Jai Bhim" from behind the bars.

First convention:
23-24 October 1974, Nagpur

The schism in the top leadership of the Dalit Panther was no longer a secret. We were trying to explain through newspapers and public meetings that it was just difference of opinions. The main bone of contention was communism – whether we should take the path of communism or stay away from it. The majority of Dalit Panthers were against communism, but we felt the need to organize a convention of all our district chiefs within and outside Maharashtra, to settle the issue once and for all. We called a convention from 23-24 October 1974 in Nagpur and I issued a statement.

The statement also said that 100,000 Dalit Panthers would take to the streets coinciding with the winter session of Parliament. It further stated that Dalit Panthers were going to make some sensational statements while deposing before the Bhasme Commission that was inquiring into the Worli-Naigaon riots. I asked the government, which had merely announced that it would withdraw the cases filed against Dalit Panthers, to either withdraw the cases or club them together in one court. The statement concluded on a confident note, saying that Dalit Panther would fight back with full force. The cases had been filed against Dalit Panthers in all the districts of Maharashtra.

Meanwhile, the Dalit Panthers from Pune were up in arms against Namdeo Dhasal. Ramesh Kamble, the president of the Pune unit, had issued a statement calling for Dalit Panthers from Pune to defy the leadership of Dhasal. He pointed out that the Dalit Pan-

ther was an organization that fought injustice committed against Dalits all over the country. He added that while the Dalit Panther imitated the struggles of social rebels Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule, it also wanted to expose those who were misusing the name of Dr Ambedkar.

Namdeo Dhasal, Sunil Dighe, Jayant Pradhan and others used to hold secret meeting in Lonavala, near Pune, to chart out the course of action in Pune and the office-bearers of the Pune unit would be asked to endorse their decisions like rubber stamps. It provoked a backlash from the Dalit Panthers who were averse to communism and Dhasal's attitude. Prakash Thorat, Salim Qureshi, Uttam Gaikwad and Shyam Avchare supported Kamble.

Dhasal sacked Kamble. Raja Dhale then issued a statement saying that Dhasal's action was illegal because he had no authority to do so. Dhasal, who was probably expecting Dhale's response, announced that he had already sacked Dhale and his supporters. Dhasal also announced his executive committee. It had Latif Khatik as the president, Dhasal and Arjun Dangle as secretaries, and Pralhad Chendwankar, Dhanawant, Uttam Kamble, Bhai Patole and Ramdas Sorte as members. The new executive committee passed a resolution claiming that those who were working hand in glove with the people in power had been sacked. It passed another resolution to proclaim that the organization would sternly fight atrocities committed against Dalits, farm-labourers and drought-hit people by following the revolutionary philosophy of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar.

After Dhasal had sacked Dhale and his supporters, the decision was taken to hold a convention to announce the sacking of Dhasal. Dalit Panthers from Gujarat, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka were invited for the convention. One of the reasons for inviting all of them was that we were planning to gather 100,000 Dalit Panthers to march to Delhi. I wrote letters to all our district chiefs in Maharashtra and issued instructions through a letter cyclostyled on 8 October 1974. Since organizational changes were to take place, I had also asked for resolutions of district units, along with two names from each district for the state-level executive committee. The del-

egate fee was fixed at Rs 11.

Then there was the issue of who would inaugurate the convention. At the time, Thirumati Satyawani Muthu, a minister in the M. Karunanidhi government in Tamil Nadu, had quit to form Thazhthapptor Munnetra Kazhagam party. She had declared that her party would work along the lines of the Dalit Panther of Maharashtra. All the newspapers in Maharashtra had given wide publicity to her. When the news appeared in *The Times of India*, the London unit of Dalit Panthers supported her. We decided to invite her to inaugurate our convention.

Muthu's secretary responded to our invitation saying that she would be happy to inaugurate the convention of Dalit Panthers. On October 21, I held a press conference and announced that our convention would be held at Bhagwat Jadhav Nagar (Morbhavan, Sitabardi), Nagpur, and that Satyawani Muthu would inaugurate it and Raja Dhale would preside over it. I had circulated the press release to all newspapers in Nagpur while I camped in the city on the eve of the convention.

I organized preparatory meetings and distributed the work among Baban Lavhatre, Prakash Ramteke, Bhivaji Badage, Bhimrao Naik, Madhukar Lade, Tuka Koche, Vinod Dongre, Baban Bansod, Thomas Kamble, Harshkumar Waghmare, Baban Kathane and others. Several sub-committees were formed. Vice-Principal Waghmare was assisting me. We held a plenary session in Nagsen Ground, Bezan Baug, in Nagpur. It was well attended because of the wide publicity it got from the press, including the news of Dhasal being sacked.

All top activists from Mumbai, including Dadabhau Salve, M.D. Gaikwad, C.R. Jadhav and Suresh Sawant, attended the convention. Those among the others were Shyam Pandit, Jayant Bhalerao, Karunasagar Pagare, M.S. Andherikar, Sarabhai Velunjkar, Balasaheb Tigote, Datta Jadhav, Gopal Chandne, Nandu Kamble, Ashok Gaikwad (Kalamb), Vasant Rajas and S.S. Pradhan. Around five thousand youths entered the hall (the venue), filling every available space. Preetamkumar Shegaonkar and Gangadhar Gade came with their supporters from Aurangabad. Since the two

were at loggerheads with each other, both had pressurized me to appoint them on the state executive committee.

Satyawani Muthu sent a telegram at the last moment, expressing her inability to attend – and therefore inaugurate – the convention. It was inevitable because of the lack of proper communication. Later, on 28 October 1974, she wrote to me explaining in detail that she had not been contacted after the initial invitation and that she knew nobody in Nagpur. We then requested the chief of the Gujarat unit of Dalit Panthers, Rameshchandra Parmar, to inaugurate the convention. He agreed, and in his very effective speech in Hindi, he criticized Gandhism for being baseless. Everything – inauguration, subject-committees – went ahead as scheduled. The meal distribution went haywire though because of large number of supporters accompanying Gade and Shegaonkar.

The resolution to sack Namdeo Dhasal from the organization was moved. I anchored the convention. Dhale presided over the discussion and the resolution was passed with a loud applause.Thousands of Dalit Panthers endorsed the sacking of Dhasal. The appointment of the executive committee of Maharashtra was also a sensitive issue. Dhale was the president and he was unanimously re-elected. I was the general secretary and was expecting that somebody would suggest my name for another term. However, people were busy promoting themselves and I was more concerned about the smooth conduct of the convention. In between, I had to intervene to settle the pandemonium over the meal distribution, by asking Bhivaji Badage to get some bags of foodgrains on credit. In the melee, the executive committee was announced. Raja Dhale as the president; Baban Lavhatre (Nagpur), S.M. Pradhan (Nanded), Ramesh Kamble (Pune) and Bhai Sangare (Mumbai) as vice-presidents; Avinash Mahatekar (Mumbai) as general secretary; Umakant Randhir (Mumbai) as the treasurer; and Nandu Kamble (Sangli), Dayanand Mhaske (Mumbai) and Prof Lihitkar as secretaries. I, along with Vitthalrao Sathe, Ramdas Athawale and Arun Kamble, did not find a place in the committee.

A commission probes Worli-Naigaon riots

Once a riot has subsided, political parties and social organizations usually demand a judicial enquiry. Such commissions of enquiry usually turn out to be useless. What followed the Worli-Naigaon riots was no different. Both Dalits and anti-Dalits demanded a judicial enquiry. Such demand suits the government that does not want to punish the guilty, because on the pretext of a judicial enquiry, it can buy time and thereby excuse itself. It also helps the government in pretending to deliver justice till the dust settles and both sides are pacified. The deadline for the commission to submit its report can be pushed back further and further, again and again, to dilute the hostile atmosphere. The recommendations of a commission are not binding on the government, hence it may or may not accept them. Yet a commission is appointed to conduct an enquiry and find out the causes of a riot.

It is also not binding on the people concerned to depose before the commission and the findings depend on information given by witnesses. Since deposing before a commission requires payment of court fees, the response to such an exercise is always poor.

We were also not enthusiastic over the appointment of this commission of enquiry. We intended to stay away from such a commission because the people conducting the enquiry were from the same government that had triggered the riots in the first place.

When the demand for a judicial enquiry into the Worli-Naigaon riots was made, the Maharashtra government accepted it. Following the assurance from the chief minister, the home department's special cell issued a notification (dated 18 February 1974). A justice from the Bombay High Court, S.B. Bhasme, was appointed to the com-

mission. The terms of reference of the commission of enquiry were:

1. Whether Dalit Panthers, Neo-Buddhists, Scheduled Castes and other communities were involved in the riots. What were the causes of the riots and how did the riots take place?
2. Whether police force was justified in its actions and whether it used excessive force.
3. Whether the role of the police personnel was neutral or biased.
4. Whether any group or organization triggered or fanned the riots.

Maharashtra government's secretary, J.C. Agarwal, issued the notification. Additional sessions judge and additional assistant judge (Thane), A.A. Halabe, was appointed the secretary of the commission. The lawyers appointed were B.D. Kamble, A.H. Syed (for the commission); B.H. Mistry, Y.M. Murudkar (for police); D.G. Prabhu, P.L. Saigaonkar (Dalit Panthers); D.B. Mistry, P.R. Mukhedkar (Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasangh); S.S. Phanse, Wamanrao Khandkar (Republican Party of India); K.D. Gaikwad (Bharatiya Vikas Sangh); B.K. Sawant (Bharatiya Boudhha Sanstha); and Bhikku Shivlibodhi (Prof N.N. Shewale) for the Buddhist International Centre. The riots broke out on 5 January 1974 and lasted until 16 February 1974. Before the commission could start its work, riots broke out again and the tenure of the commission was extended till April 19 by issuing another notification.

It was the first commission of its kind for Dalits. It was kind of a study group on riots against Dalits. Given the terms of reference of the commission, we felt its decision would be important and hence decided to depose before it. It was an occasion to search for the casteist tendencies nurtured by all political parties and organizations. We looked at it as an opportunity of categorically telling the commission that Dalit Panthers and the Ambedkarite community were not responsible for the riots and that the communal organizations and the government had triggered them. It was also an opportunity to expose the caste prejudices of the police personnel. We knew that if we stayed away from the process of enquiry, our side would not be represented at all and the others would justify the excessive force used.

That is how 13 of us including me, Raja Dhale and Dayanand Mhaske deposed before the commission. Our lawyer D.G. Prabhu, assisted by P.L. Saigaonkar, effectively represented the Dalit Panthers. Other organizations also registered their statements. B.C. Kamble, his political outfit and his religious organization Buddha Sasan Sabha stayed away. Among the witnesses who appeared before the commission were 46 from the police, 34 from the Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasangh, 14 from the Republican Party of India, nine from the Dalit Panthers, three from the Buddhist International Centre and nine from the Bharatiya Boudhha Mahasabha.

There were numerous people who had volunteered to depose before the commission, but fewer people actually deposed. For instance, 198 applications were filed on behalf of the Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasangh but only 34 witnesses appeared before the commission. Similarly, 126 people from the Republican Party of India had volunteered to depose, but only 14 actually did. It indicates how casual people were about deposing before the commission. However, all of the nine Dalit Panthers who had volunteered appeared before the commission: Raja Dhale (witness No 47), Rajaram S. Badhekar (No 48), Ramesh Ramchandra Mane (49), Yeshwant Kisan Gawli (50), Digambar Anna Shinde (51), Dilip Narayan Khaire (52), J.V. Pawar (53), Dayanand Jagannath Mhaske (54) and Madhukar Maruti Pawar (55). Jalandar Kirtikar from the Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasangh had tried very hard to motivate people to register as witnesses, but he did not get the desired response.

The Bhasme commission recorded 118 witness statements, including those of social workers like journalist Anil Avchat and Bhagwat Jadhav's brother S.R. Jadhav. So, only 118 of the 429 people who filed affidavits in the commission appeared in person as witnesses.

While appearing before the Bhasme Commission, we had to undergo a strange experience. B.N. Mistry, the lawyer of the police department, was a prominent personality and while defending the police, he used to make attempts to trap us. His questions were often food for thought, but we were quick to realize what his in-

tention was. Dhale faced his verbal bombardment for 15 days in a row. I was examined for 10 days. But he could not get what they wanted. We spoke the truth, neutralizing his craftiness, much to his disappointment. He wanted to establish that Dalit Panthers were responsible for the riots, but all three of us (me, Dhale and Mhaske) foiled his attempts.

Assisted by Inspector Najigud, Mistry wanted to prove that Dalits as a community had a tendency of rioting. We saved Dalits from being branded as rioters. They grilled me on every word written in the statement that I had issued on January 10. They also produced some of my poems to build up their argument. We realized that Justice Bhasme, along with the lawyers, had read us as well as the works of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. They were trying to lure us into confessing that we had established the Dalit Panther because we were frustrated with the Republican leaders. It would have given them a reason to say that we had committed the riots because we were frustrated and angry. When we succeeded in preventing them from reaching their goal, they could only congratulate us. The minutes of the commission show how we faced the volley of questions. This was a lesson well learnt for the future.

Justice Bhasme submitted the report to the government on 24 September 1976. Later, the government released it in Marathi and English for the public. The report was discussed in both houses of the legislature. Some recommendations of the commission were accepted while others were rejected. Those accepted were never implemented. The Dalit Panther was not indicted in the report, despite the outbursts of Republican leaders that Ambedkarites would teach a lesson to Dalit Panthers, the rioters. The commission found the actions of the police at times to be justified and at other times to be unjustified. The government succeeded in its strategy to buy time. The commission itself achieved little but our appearances before the commission left us wiser.

The commission also came as a windfall for many lawyers, who received handsome paycheques. Some made more than they could have in a year at the court.

Dhasal's citadel collapses

When the ideological differences over communism cropped up, the Dalit Panther split into the Dhale faction and the Dhasal faction. Since the main leaders rejected the path of communism, the Dhale faction became powerful, while the Dhasal faction had to remain content only with the Pune unit. Dhasal's magic had stopped working and the ideological churning had weaned away youths from him. Several Dalit Panthers wrote and circulated booklets on the ideological confusion and warned against the dangers of following the communist path and "turning the wheel back". Youths were asked to remain loyal to Ambedkar's ideology and shun the communist path. Several articles were written and interviews given to clear the confusion.

However, the masses felt that the Dalit Panther had gone the RPI way and fragmented. Some youths could not make up their mind and preferred to withdraw from the movement. Most of them were anguished about the negative publicity generated by the split and wanted Dalit Panthers to discuss and sort out differences among themselves instead of going public with them. They did not want us to end up like the Republicans. What they were saying was true but there was a problem. Unlike the split in the Republican Party, the Dalit Panther had split over ideological differences, not because of the self-importance of any individual leader.

This split adversely affected the organization. The Dalit Panther, which had swept society like a hurricane, itself ended up like an uprooted tree. The split weakened the organization and hit the morale of our youths. The communists had tears of happiness in their eyes. It was their jubilance of destroying a fiery organization.

During those days, Jaiprakash Narayan's movement was becoming stronger in its opposition to the Congress government. It

was as if the entire country was on the mouth of a volcano. He made a controversial statement that was construed as provoking the army against the government, culminating in the declaration of Emergency in the country on 25 June 1975. The Emergency constricted all freedoms. Our meetings and agitation, however, went on as usual. Shankarrao Chavan was the chief minister of Maharashtra then.

Dhasal was now headed in a different direction. Dhasal, who was once in the forefront of the protests against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in Pune and had asked our youths to carry iron rods to fight the stick-wielding Congress goons, had accepted Indira Gandhi's leadership. He became Indira Gandhi's ardent supporter and Chavan's favourite disciple. He became a propagandist of the Congress party and openly helped the party organize a farmers' rally in Pune in which Chavan was the chief guest. His love for the Congress party was such that he even asked why the police did not arrest socialist leader Mrinal Gore. It was the perfect example of the downfall of a rebel. He started praising Indira Gandhi and wrote a long poem, *Priyadarshini: Amchya Itihasatla Ek Apariharya Paatra* (Priyadarshini: An inevitable figure in our history). During those days, people wearing white caps (Congress party supporters) used to throng Gavaskar Hall of the Mumbai Marathi Granth Sangrahalay like a flock of herons. Dhasal was turning back the wheel of history and flowing with the tide. We were swimming against the current with our strong arms, whereas he had spread out his hands to fulfil his needs. Chavan had made him a member of a committee of the irrigation department, making him a stakeholder of the establishment. He was being accommodated.

Dhasal also broke away from his communist friends like Sunil Dighe, Bal Khairmode and Hiraman Pagare. He started abusing communists and warned the people to remain alert against the communists' tendency to spread ideological confusion. His associates Arjun Dangle, Prahlad Chendwankar, S.M. Khadtale and Uttam Kamble were fed up with him, accused him of being dictatorial and wanted to quit his faction. Dhasal had levelled the same allegation against Dhale.

The Pune unit of the Dalit Panther, which had once supported Dhasal, was up in arms against him. A meeting of the central executive of the Dhasal faction of the Dalit Panther was held in Pune. Dhasal was accused of indiscipline, creating a rift in the organization, taking unilateral decisions, spreading rumours about activists, abusing others, coming to blows, dilly-dallying over organizing a convention, extorting money from well-wishers and using it for merrymaking. He was also accused of forming an alliance with the Congress unilaterally. Dhasal, who had never been disciplined, then expelled his former friends – Sunil Dighe (vice-president of Dhasal faction), Bal Khairmode and Hiraman Pagare – from his organization.

After his faction collapsed, Dhasal tried to enter our organization through Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar. During those days, Sangare and Mahatekar were functioning as a separate subgroup and were bitter critics of Dhale and me. The subgroup had come into existence not because of ideological differences. Rather, it was plain jealousy that had caused the rift.

Every year, Dhale used to visit Nagpur on October 14 on the anniversary of our conversion to Buddhism. Back in Mumbai, Sangare and company organized a religious function to mark the conversion anniversary at the Bhoiwada Panchayat Hall. I agreed to attend as it was a religious function, but on the condition that there wouldn't be speeches against one another or anything that would promote schism. I told them that they could hold the meeting once Dhale returned from Nagpur. However, Sangare insisted on going ahead with the function because a decision had to be taken on the same day. I stayed away from the function, incurring their criticism. The result was that a new group led by Sangare and Mahatekar was born. Now we had three factions: one led by Dhale and me, the other by Dhasal and Dangle, and the third by Sangare and Mahatekar.

Sangare had a grouse against us – Dhale and me – because we were graduates. Besides, we were poets and writers, with friends in newspaper offices. In their reports of any event that the Dalit Panther was part of, journalists used to put down our names without even asking us. Initially, newspapers used to print three names, including that of Sangare, but later, Sangare's name started getting

excluded. Sangare was a good orator and the youths liked his speeches, but the newspapers did not mention him. Mahatekar – who had changed his name from Avinash Sharad Kamble to Avinash Sharad Mahatekar – used to be a Kamble till 4pm and a Mahatekar afterwards. He would tell me not to telephone his office – and ask for Mahatekar – because he met me daily.

Sangare started strengthening his group by involving Tansen Nanavre (who had been sacked by us), Jagdish Ramteke and Baburao Shejwal to reach out to the people living in Wadala, Mithagar, Bhandup, Mulund and Kalyan. Activists like Manoj Sansare from Wadala, Jagtap from Bhandup and Prahlad Rokde from Kalyan came under Sangare's influence. Sangare also played the Konkani-versus-Dakhani (Dalits hailing from the Konkan versus those from the Deccan) card to consolidate his position. He knew from experience in Mazgaon's Love Lane area that Dalits were also divided along regional lines and whenever Konkani Dalits were abused, Dakhni Dalits were happy. He started playing this card in the Saat Rasta area.

They launched a smear campaign against us by publishing Tansen Nanavre's booklet titled *Paach Peer*. To some extent, they succeeded in getting members for their group, but it lacked quality. Then they tied up with Dhasal's faction. However, the camaraderie was short-lived. When this whole exercise turned out to be futile, Sangare joined Nilubhau Khadilkar's Practical Socialism and became its spokesperson. *Nava Kaal,* the newspaper, of which Khadilkar was owner-editor, gave him publicity. In due course, Suresh Nagarsekar exposed Sangare's superficiality. He could not put down his roots there. One of the reasons Sangare hated us was that we had opposed the proposal of an alliance with the newly formed Janata Dal. We had opposed it because Jan Sangh was a constituent of the Janata Dal entity. When elections were announced after the Emergency was lifted, Sangare declared his support for Janata Dal. He became a paid orator of the party. We then dissolved the Dalit Panther. As soon as we did that, Sangare stopped getting invites to speak. We had messed up his bread and butter.

The Republican nest in 1974

Those in the Republican Party of India had become jittery ever since the chairman of the Law Commission Dr P.B. Gajendragadkar said on 19 January 1974 that the rise of the Dalit Panther was a dangerous signal. This warning was not only for the government but also the Republicans and both had taken note of it. Dr Gajendragadkar added that the challenge of bridging economic disparity could be accepted if the law was implemented honestly. He also said that social equality would not be established by making laws alone but that the cooperation of the people was necessary, for which the younger generation had to put forth its decisive stand. He pointed out that the Constitution had promised socio-economic justice for Dalits and landless labourers and if it was not fulfilled promptly there would be a flare-up of violence. Economic disparity could be tackled through legal means, he said, but making laws cannot usher in social equality. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had issued the same warning to the nation while presenting the Constitution in the constituent assembly. The government had never taken it seriously. Exactly 24 years after Dr Ambedkar spoke those words, Dr Gajendragadkar had to reiterate.

After the experiment of unifying Republican factions on 26 January 1974, Republicans spread a rumour that the Dalit Panther was finished. Dalit Panthers countered it and called it baseless. Our Vidarbha region organizers Bhimrao Thul and S.R. Ganar had said that the Dalit Panther was a fiery organization attempting to bring about social change by treading the path of revolution that Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had envisaged. However, the Republican

Party continued its tirade against us. Its leaders, including Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar, said that the Republicans would pick up weapons to counter armed attacks. That was an attempt to create an impression that the party would soon adopt an aggressive stance on issues like casteism.

Most of the Republicans' activities were centred on the birth anniversaries of Lord Buddha and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. The celebrations lasted two months every year and were held in different places. The general theme of these programmes revolved around swearing by the unity of Republicans and criticizing the Dalit Panther and the Congress party. It was not possible for leaders of all the factions to come together on the same stage, but in Mumbai they did. At one such public meeting held in Mumbai, B.C. Kamble, R.G. Kharat, Sumantrao Gaikwad and others spoke. They said that there was a conspiracy to sever Mumbai from Maharashtra and that the Republicans would not tolerate it. Gaikwad appealed to R.D. Bhandare and D.T. Rupavate to quit Congress and join the Republicans.

Meanwhile, Republican leader R.S. Gavai was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Maharashtra Legislative Council, while former Republican leader N.M. Kamble was elected to the Rajya Sabha. The Congress party was behind both the appointments, and the purpose was to break the unity of Republicans. Kamble belonged to the Congress, while Gavai had the support of the Congress. There was no question of RPI leaders and supporters felicitating Kamble, but they did felicitate Gavai on 16 March 1974. Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar and B.C. Kamble praised Gavai in their speeches and stressed the importance of Republican unity. While Republican leaders were struggling to maintain their unity, the Congress was finding ways of breaking it. The unity was not possible with the Congress party's solidarity with Gavai and it was impossible for Gavai to relinquish his new position. This meant that the Congress had sown the seeds of Republican fragmentation.

Between 31 March and 6 April 1974, the Republicans addressed five public meetings in Pune, Buldhana, Kolhapur, Beed and Thane districts. Before the meeting scheduled on 3 April, a huge march

was taken out to showcase the unity. Those who addressed the meeting included R.S. Gavai, B.C. Kamble, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar and Shantabai Dani. The common theme of their speeches was that there should be no alliance with the Congress party.

Later, for a public show of their unity, they went on a tour between 10-24 April addressing six more meetings in Parbhani, Nashik, Dhule, Chandrapur, Nagpur and Bhandara. They launched a scathing attack on the Congress party as well as communist leader S.A. Dange. The RPI presidium met in Amravati from 27-29 April, in which the leaders assured each other that the unity would remain intact. Now, the presidium had 15 members with the induction of C.M. Aramugam (Karnataka), Harishchandra Shastri (Madhya Pradesh), Sundar Rajan (Tamil Nadu) and Harishchandra Chaudhari (New Delhi). Representing Maharasahtra at the meeting were R.S. Gavai, B.C. Kamble, N.H. Kumbhare and Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar.

During the deliberations, the original constitution and flag of the party was ratified for the united Republicans. On the same day, Dalit Panthers paraded 30 donkeys on the roads of Amravati to convey the message that the meeting of the Republicans was a farce. Each donkey carried a placard around its neck with the name of an RPI leader. The leading donkey had the placard with Gavai's name. It was our attempt to hit back at Gavai in his hometown.

Though R.S. Gavai swore by the unity of Republicans, he was not willing to break his ties with the Congress party. Members of the Khobragade faction would ask Gavai about severing his links with the Congress party, to which he used to say that the resignation letter was in his pocket. He never took out the letter though. The time was not ripe for it. He had probably realized that the unity would not last and was not willing to snap his ties with the Congress for something that was temporary. He was buying time and waiting for the Republican unity to come apart, so that he could take out his letter and tear it to fool people.

The Khobragade group could not tolerate Gavai's stance any longer and, in a meeting held on 21 July 1974, came to a decision that Gavai and his supporters should be suspended from the unified

RPI. They questioned the propriety of "carrying the burden" of Gavai, who was not willing to snap his ties with the Congress party. The Khobragade group was bent on exposing Gavai and his followers. To counter the propaganda of the Khobragade group, W.K. Ganar issued a statement demanding that Khobragade be sacked from the unified party for raking up factionalism and indulging in activities that were contrary to the decision taken by the presidium.

You would think that creating awareness on the issue and unmasking Gavai and his supporters was the duty of all other leaders of the unified RPI. That didn't happen and even the laypersons remained loyal to their group leader. When the RPI split again, these people followed their faction leaders. The unified party continued organizing marches in several districts, like Satara, Kolhapur, Osmanabad, Ahmednagar, Akola, Nashik and Nanded, to demand protection for Dalits and redistribution of agricultural land and to protest against unemployment and inflation. Several organizations were speaking out against inflation at the time. Cow dung was thrown on Minister of State D.T. Rupavate on 29 August 1974. Between 22 and 30 August 1974, the Republicans addressed 11 public meetings and held three marches.

During the same period, Dr Baba Adhav's "Ek Gaon, Ek Paanavathaa" (One Village, One Water Source) campaign was getting entire villages to share a water source in keeping with its slogan. However, in such villages, as soon as the campaigners left the village after the programme, the upper-caste villagers used to beat up Dalits for polluting their water source. This campaign did not have the backing of the government. Later, Sharad Pawar as the minister of state for home attended one such programme in Pune district under heavy police protection claiming that it would end casteism.

The RPI general council meeting held in Nagpur on 14 and 15 September 1974 and presided over by Ishwaribai proved significant. The meeting passed a resolution to impeach R.S. Gavai and N.H. Kumbhare and sent show-cause notices to them. They were asked to reply to the notices by September 30. The council also pledged the party's support to the anti-Congress movement of Jaiprakash Narayan. Shantabai Dani was removed from RPI central

executive. Rajabhau Khobragade, Datta Kutti, Dr Subramanium, Gurcharan Singh (Punjab), Mansingh and Dr Prashant (Uttar Pradesh) held a press conference.

On 19 September, N.H. Kumbhare issued a statement claiming that the meeting presided over by Ishwaribai was illegal. He further stated that the decision of the council was not binding on him, Gavai and Dani, as the council had no authority to do so. It led to a war of words between the Khobragade and Gavai camps. Of the three post-unification factions, two were fighting against each other, while the third faction of B.C. Kamble remained a silent spectator. On 4 October 1974, Gavai called a press conference and accused Khobragade of engineering a split in the party. He also endorsed the view of Kumbhare that the decision taken by the council against him was unauthorized and hence not binding.

Coinciding with these developments was the announcement of elections for many municipal corporations and zilla parishads (district councils), and Gavai started "missing" the Congress party and became restless. On October 13, he announced that his party would tie up with a progressive political party for the civic polls to fight the Jana Sangh and the Shiv Sena. This progressive political party turned out to be the Congress. Gavai remained loyal to the Congress party, and in one of his interviews to the newspaper *Tarun Bharat*, expressed his loyalty towards chief minister Vasantrao Naik. Meanwhile, Buddhists were annoyed because Jagjivan Ram had been invited as the chief guest for a rally to be held in Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur, on 25 October to celebrate the anniversary of the conversion of Dalits to Buddhism.

The conversion anniversary is October 14 and the Akhil Bharatiya Dhamma Diksha Mahotsav Samiti had already celebrated it in the presence of about 3,000 Buddhists. Jagjivan Ram, who was a union minister, had already incurred the wrath of Dalits for his criticism of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Buddhists. On 24 October, Jagjivan Ram addressed a meeting of Congress members and on 25 October, he visited Deekshabhoomi and paid tributes to Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Buddha's statues. The Buddhists knew that it was a deceptive exercise. The Republican Yuvak

Sangh held demonstrations against Jagjivan Ram at Panchsheel Chowk.

Rajabhau Khobragade was elected as the RPI president on 23 October 1974. He declared that the party would launch a country-wide agitation from 26 October to 6 December to draw attention of the government to the pending demands of Dalits. The Gavai group convened meetings from 23-25 October under the chairmanship of Arumugam and announced the expulsion of Khobragade and Datta Kutti from the party.

One Mahaparinirvan Diwas, two Dalit Panther observances

On 6 December 1974, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's Mahaparinirvan Diwas (death anniversary), the Dalit Panther held a rally at Chaityabhoomi in Dadar. This was our third such rally. I had issued a statement about the rally and also presided over the event. Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare, Avinash Mahatekar, Dayanand Mhaske and Vitthalrao Sathe were present. We also held an exhibition of photographs of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and paintings of Lord Buddha.

The same day, the Dalit Panther led by Namdeo Dhasal held a "dharna" (sit-in strike) at Hutatma Chowk. Ironically, this was akin to the functioning of the various factions of the RPI, about which Dalit Panthers had been bitter critics. This was the first occasion when two different programmes were held on the same day under the banner of the Dalit Panther.

These two separate public functions of the Dalit Panther demoralized our members, who started asking themselves whether the entire struggle had gone to waste and kept away from both the programmes. The rally at Chaityabhoomi was massive, but it was difficult to say how many of those present were Dalit Panthers, because every year millions visit Chaityabhoomi on Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's death anniversary. Speaking on the occasion, Dhale said that Ambedkarism was the only cure for a country infested with casteism, to bring about a revolution. Launching a scathing attack on the Dhasal-led Dalit Panther, Dhale said that Dalits would not fall prey to the tactics of leaders who misused Dr Babasaheb

Ambedkar's name for personal benefits, thereby cheating them. He pointed out that the masses that deify leaders also had the capacity of slapping them when required. He further said that while the Dalit Panther was on the right path, the communists who masqueraded as revolutionaries had become perverts and were conspiring to break up the Dalit Panther. Taking a jibe at the communists, he said that those who had undertaken the job of creating revolutionaries had chosen to beg by staging a dharna. He hoped that Dalits would not fall into the trap.

Dhale also criticized Jaiprakash Narayan's movement, pointing out that Narayan had launched an agitation against corruption but was silent on casteism that had been rampant for thousands of years. Dhale said that any agitation that did not acknowledge casteism was half-hearted and one-sided. Those who spoke on the occasion included Ramdas Athawale, Dayanand Mhaske, Vitthal-rao Sathe, Anant Bachhav, Sitaram Jadhav and Arun Kamble.

At Hutatma Chowk, the Dhasal-led Dalit Panther observed a dharna from 8am to 6pm listing various demands of the Dalits, Tribals and the working class. They hoisted a different, red and black flag – red indicating revolution and black, exploitation. Those who participated included Latif Khatik, Arjun Dangle, Shantaram Divekar (former mayor of Pune), Prahlad Chendwankar, Chan-drakant Chavan, Anil Kamble and Subhash Sarin. The agitators condemned exploitation of the Tribals and demanded land for the landless; jobs for the unemployed; concessions for the Buddhists; eradication of corruption, smugglers and black marketers; and curbs on inflation. Once the dharna had concluded, Khatik spoke on the future course of action, while Dangle and Chendwankar claimed that they were not communists but Ambedkarites.

On the occasion, various organizations had held several impor-tant programmes. Dr Ambedkar College at Wadala hosted one such programme, for which a Dalit revolutionary leader from Hyder-abad, B. Shamsunder, had been invited. Addressing the audience, he said that Dr Ambedkar had done historic work that mahatmas (saints) could not do in the past 3,000 years. D.G. Jadhav from Peo-ples' Education Society presided over the function. The Boudhajan

Panchayat Samiti also held a programme at Dr Ambedkar Smarak Bhavan in Parel. As part of a series of lectures, S.S. Rege delivered the second lecture. He said that Dr Ambedkar was against Brahmanism, not Brahmins, and gave several examples to illustrate his point. Ghanshyam Talwatkar, the chairman of the samiti, presided over the function.

Back at Chaityabhoomi, at a public rally to observe the Mahaparinirvan Diwas B.C. Kamble, as usual, raked up the issue of the report of investigation into the death of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar presided over the rally.

Yet another programme was held at the bandstand opposite Sachivalaya, near Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue. This statue installed by the people of Mumbai draws huge crowds on his death anniversary every year. The municipal corporation pays tribute every year on behalf of the citizens of Mumbai. That year, Dalits from south Mumbai thronged the location under the leadership of Janardhan, alias Dada Sakpal. Sumantrao Gaikwad, R.G. Ruke, A.K. Gaikwad, D.P. Kamble, V.S. Asware, Kusumtai Gangurde, Pratibha Bachhav, Anusuya Kamble, C.H. Khare, Krishnarao Gangurde, R.R. Patil and V.S. Pagare addressed the crowd.

Inhuman blinding of the Gavai brothers

On 26 September 1974, a barbaric act was committed in Dhakli village of Akola district. The eyes of two brothers were gouged out for resisting injustice. The incident did not receive the attention it deserved till I called a press conference in Mumbai on 25 January 1975. The residents of the village had justified the act and created an impression that two local goons had been punished. They failed to see that even if the two men had indulged in a criminal act, they had no authority to take the law into their own hands and mete out punishment. Nobody bothered to find out whether they were really criminals and what their crime was.

I was confronted with this horrific incident in the third week of January, when I was on a regular visit to the Siddharth Vihar hostel at Wadala. Three people from Akola district – Nana Rahate, D.N. Khandare and V.T. Adakne – were waiting for me. The Gavai brothers from Dhakli village had accompanied them. The people of the village had gouged out the eyes of both the brothers. There were 125 houses in the village, 45 of which belonged to the Gavais and their relatives. The Gavais were not in a minority. The "police patil" – the liaison of the villagers with the police – of the village was Shaligram Shinde, who was rich and used to intimidate fellow villagers. His only son, Uddhavrao, had spread a reign of terror, assuming that his father's position was a licence to commit injustice. Uddhavrao used to intimidate women working on his farm and compel them to have sexual intercourse with him.

Gopal Nathu Gavai and his brother Babruvahan Nathu Gavai were agricultural labourers and Gopal's 16-year-old daughter

Ginyanabai also use to work as a farm labourer. While she was working in the fields of Shaligram Shinde, Uddhavrao made sexual advances towards her and promised her that he would marry her. She fell into his trap and became pregnant. When Gopal came to know about it, he and his brother Babruvahan went to Shaligram and urged him to ask his son to marry the girl. Little did the Gavai brothers know that when a woman is raped, she is just a woman, but when it comes to marriage, others things like her caste, religion and economic status matter.

Shaligram not only rejected their demand but also booked the Gavai brothers for intimidating him and prosecuted the girl for concocting the story of rape. The court acquitted the Gavai brothers and the girl from the charges filed against them. It infuriated the police-patil and his son. Their caste pride was hurt. On 26 September, the police-patil called the Gavai brothers to his house. When the brothers reached the house, 20 goons of the police-patil attacked them. It was pre-planned. R.T. Patil, the police officer of the Pinjar Police Station, which had jurisdiction over Dhakli village, had already given Shaligram his approval for the attack. The goons overpowered the Gavai brothers. Nine of them sat on the brothers, while the others gouged out their eyes using a sharp instrument. As the victims bled profusely and groped around in the darkness they had just entered, they could hear Shaligram's words, "You want justice? Take this justice."

Dhakli village is about 30 km from the Akola town and the victims could not get any local transport or even a bullock cart to reach the government hospital, because the police-patil had terrorized the entire area. The wives of the victims took them to the Pinjar Police Station but the police personnel refused to register an offence. They even drove them away. The Gavai brothers were admitted to hospital in Akola the next day. The accused in the case were Shaligram Shinde, Uddhavrao Shaligram Shinde, Bhimrao Kaple, Namdeo Jadhav, Tarasingh Vanjari, Motiram Ingle, Bandu Ingle, Sudam Jadhav and Manik Gavande. The incident was reported in the local newspapers with the headline, "Criminals punished by villagers".

The activists of Dalit Panther, including Nana Rahate, D.N.

Khandare and V.T. Adakne, made efforts to secure justice for the brothers with the help of Baban Lavhatre in Nagpur. The efforts were futile, because the district collector and the deputy superintendent of police parroted the story provided by the local police. The Deputy Inspector General of Amravati, too, endorsed the report of the local police, thereby depriving the Gavai brothers of justice.

When possibilities of justice appeared bleak, Rahate, Khandare and Adakne left for Mumbai on 19 January 1975, and reached Siddharth Vihar, Wadala. After meeting them, I felt that approaching newspapers should be our priority rather than visiting top police officials or ministers. But, would the newspapers publish the news if I sent a press release to them? I wasn't sure, so I called a press conference. I was clueless about holding a press conference because I had always relied on issuing press releases. After making enquiries, I came to know about the locations where press conferences were held. While I was booking a conference room for holding the press conference, I was asked what would be the menu for the journalists. That is when I found out that journalists had to be given something to eat and drink during a press conference.

Then I visited newspaper offices to invite their representatives for the press conference. On 25 January 1975, I reached the venue along with the Gavai brothers. I had told only a few colleagues, including Raja Dhale, about it because I did not want the expenses to mount. I did not carry a written statement. When the press conference began, I asked Gavai brothers to narrate their nightmare to the reporters. Gopal Gavai was one of our members and also a volunteer of the Samata Sainik Dal. After Gopal and his brother narrated their ordeal, photographers took their photos. Shocked by the incident, some reporters went away without eating anything.

The next day, on 26 January 1975, *The Times of India* published photographs of Gavai brothers and their horrifying story. It was the Republic Day and Jaiprakash Narayan was going to address a public meeting in Shivaji Park. Speaking at the meeting, he cited the plight of the Gavai brothers to illustrate how exploitative the Congress rule was. Since Jaiprakash Narayan condemned the incident,

some newspapers that had not published it on the first day, took it up on the third or fourth day.

Nava Kaal, the newspaper, had carried the news the day after the press conference on the front page with the headline, "Village patil's barbaric act of gouging out the eyes of two Buddhists". The news report mentioned our demand, too. Since the victims had become visually handicapped for life, we had demanded that the Maharashtra government bear the responsibility of looking after their needs for the rest of their lives. Else, we said, the victims would go on an indefinite hunger strike in front of chief minister Naik's residence. The *Maharasthra Times* newspaper prominently displayed the story with a photograph and also wrote an editorial piece under the title "Amanush" (inhuman), demanding an enquiry into why the guilty hadn't been arrested for two months and calling for punitive measures against the police personnel concerned, including their dismissal. It also suggested imposing a fine on the entire village since not a single villager had come to the rescue of the victims. The *Maratha* published an editorial with the headline "Kevdhe Hay Krourya" (What a barbaric act), pointing out that though the chief minister had granted Rs 1,000 as relief to the victims as was his duty, it would have been in the fitness of things if immediate action were taken against the guilty. The editorial also noted that the case would have been hushed by the government machinery but for the expose in Mumbai.

After newspapers reported the incident, some organizations and political parties came forward to condemn the government. S. Balakrishnan, an MLA of RPI's Khobragade faction, demanded a compensation of Rs 25,000 for the victims for the loss of their eyes. He also took a dig at R.S. Gavai, who was the deputy chairman of the legislative council, by saying that it was not a matter of pride for Gavai that the incident was being hushed up till it came to light in Mumbai. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh, too, jumped on the bandwagon, with the secretary of its Mumbai unit, Baban Kulkarni, demanding an immediate enquiry and severe punishment to those responsible. He also wrote to the chief minister saying that volunteers of Jana Sangh were ready to donate eyes to the victims. This

was a strange offer because the doctors had already ruled out the possibility of eye replacement.

When chief minister Vasantrao Naik offered a compensation of Rs 1,000 to the Gavai brothers for the loss of their eyes, an infuriated Raja Dhale, while speaking at a public meeting in Siddharth Colony, Chembur, said that if someone gouged out the chief minister's eyes, he was willing to pay Rs 1,000 to the chief minister as compensation. It was highly unbecoming of a chief minister, who was also holding the home portfolio, to trivialize this horrific injury. Apart from the announcement of Gavai brothers' agitation, many organizations like the Yuvak Kranti Dal said they were going to march to the chief minister's residence. That was when government issued an order banning assembly or processions in the Malabar Hill area.

Meanwhile, Indira Gandhi's visit to Mumbai was announced. The Mumbai police used to chase me whenever VVIPs like the president or the prime minister were going to visit Mumbai. The possibility of agitations by Dalit Panthers on such occasions would make them jittery. I usually had cordial relations with police officials, but on such occasions, I would remain aloof. A day before Prime Minister Gandhi's visit to Mumbai, I was required to appear at the Naigaon court and could not avoid meeting police officials from the Special Branch I and the CID. Before they met me in the court, I had asked Ramdas Athawale to issue a public statement that the Gavai brothers planned to commit suicide by jumping in front of the prime minister's car.

When the statement reached newspaper offices, the police came to know about it immediately, for some journalists are police informers. A posse of policemen came to meet me in the Naigaon court. They wanted to know the whereabouts of the Gavai brothers and when exactly they planned to end their lives. They were probably thinking of shifting the Gavai brothers to an undisclosed place as a preventive measure. I told the police officials that after finishing my business at the court, I would look out for the Gavai brothers and get the information.

Balachandran, a deputy commissioner of police, and Mokashi,

an assistant commissioner of police, told me that they were willing to arrange for the Gavai brothers to meet the prime minister if they gave up their suicide plan. I told them that since the crime was so barbaric, it was not within my means to dissuade the Gavai brothers from their plan. The police were in a dilemma. If Gavai brothers were arrested, they would vent their ire to the newspapers, and if they were left untouched, they might let themselves be run over by the prime minister's car. Finally, Balachandran agreed to arrange for Gavai brothers, Raja Dhale and me to meet Mrs Gandhi. Balachandran agreed to escort us to the visitors' lounge at the airport. Dhale and I had gone to meet my brother Tukaram Pawar, who lived in the Central Public Works Department's quarters near the airport.

It was our first meeting with a prime minister. On 1 February 1975, when she alighted from the aircraft, she was led to the place where we were waiting, along with the chief minister, his Cabinet colleagues, the director general of police, the police commissioner of Mumbai and other officials. She expected us to courteously fold our hands when she approached us. We did not. When she folded her hands, I told her, pointing to the Gavai brothers, "See with your own eyes, what king of atrocities are being committed in your rule." She was enraged at my behaviour and asked, "Yeh raj(ya) kya tumhara nahi hein?' (Is this not your rule/state, too?). I fearlessly told her, "No. This kind of injustice is done in your rule alone." I was using the word "raj" to mean "rule" while she probably heard "rajya" or "state" (of Maharashtra). For about four minutes, I vented my anguish, before Chief Minister Naik interrupted to introduce Raja Dhale to her: "This is Raja Dhale," he said. He probably wanted to tell her that Dhale was the same person who had written a controversial article about the national flag. But Dhale would have none of it. He snapped at the chief minister and asked him to allow me to continue my conversation with the prime minister. I picked up where I left off and told her about the whole incident. The Gavai brothers narrated their ordeal and asked for justice.

This visit of Mrs Gandhi turned out to be different. When she

heard about the barbaric act and looked into the eye sockets of the victims, her eyes were filled with tears. She immediately asked the chief minister to conduct a thorough enquiry into the incident. I raised my voice and said, "We don't trust the Maharasahtra government. If an investigation is to be held, let it be done by the Central Bureau of Investigation. Maharashtra government is an enemy of Dalits." I gave a memorandum to Mrs Gandhi, who accepted it and handed it over to her personal assistant. When I was going to give the chief minister a copy of the memorandum, he tried to avoid receiving it. When Mrs Gandhi saw it, she shouted at him, "He is giving a memorandum to you and you are not even accepting it. If you behave like this, these people will go against you." Naik had no choice but to accept it. She turned and walked away, touching her eyes with the end of her saree. We returned in a police vehicle with the satisfaction that we were able to present the case of Gavai brothers in person to the prime minister. She went on to announce compensation for the victims.

On 2 February 1975, all the newspapers prominently displayed the news of the Gavai brothers meeting the prime minister. I received a message from the police that the chief minister wanted to meet the Gavai brothers. I, along with the brothers, went to the Sachivalaya and met the chief minister. The meeting was just a formality. The real meeting was to be held in the office of the minister of state for home, Ratnappa Kumbhar, where home secretary Padmakar Gavai, Director General of Police Rajyadhyaksha and Deputy Chairman of the Legislative Council R.S. Gavai were present. Kumbhar took the details of the case from Gopal Gavai and asked him what his expectation was. His secretary and the home secretary were taking notes.

After we finished, R.S. Gavai asked me to send the Gavai brothers to his house for dinner, saying that around 25 people dined at his house daily. I had actually expected him to say that he would arrange for a debate on the issue in the legislative council. So, I was irritated and said that I was unaware that he had opened a dining service, or else I would have sent all the needy people to his house. He was not expecting such a reaction. He always used to

carry a box full of *paan* (betel leaves) and chewed *paan* regularly, whether he was in the legislature building or outside. Whenever confronted with an uncomfortable situation, he had the habit of opening the box and stuffing his mouth with *paan*, to avoiding further conversation. He did just that.

Just then, home secretary Padmakar Gavai conveyed a message that I should take the victims to Madhukar Gavai, the deputy inspector general of CID. The Mumbai police offered a vehicle for transport but I declined. Many government employees waiting outside Kumbhar's office had saluted me with a "Jai Bhim" on my way in. It was my responsibility to show them that I was not taking any favours from the government.

We reached Madhukar Gavai's office. He was waiting for us. He insisted on us having tea despite my refusal. I told him about the incident, the attitude of the local police officials and their reports on the incident. I requested him to conduct a fresh enquiry. Madhukar Gavai was the brother of home secretary Padmakar Gavai, who apparently issued some orders, because the government machinery had swung into action. Subsequently, the report submitted by the local police turned out to be false, prompting angry reactions from various organizations, political parties and newspapers. The DIG, Amravati, a Patil, had no option but to submit the true report to Madhukar Gavai, also a DIG.

The investigation into the case took a new turn and on 4 February, the chief minister announced that deputy chief of the state police himself was investigating the incident. Kumbhar announced the suspension of Inspector Patil, who was in charge of the Pinjar Police Station, to avoid any possible interference during the fresh investigation. The case was revised and the accused were charged under new sections of the Indian Penal Code for stricter punishment.

The savage crime against the Gavai brothers shattered the image of Maharashtra and the opposition parties got a stick to beat the government with, especially as the chief minister belonged to a backward class. This also roused the "sugar lobby" (of Maratha politicians running sugar cooperative mills). It began actively

working against the Chief Minister Naik, who had been ruling the state for over 12 years. The Dalit Panther had already complained about Naik to the prime minister. Finally, on February 20, newspaper headlines screamed that Naik had been removed from his post.

The eyes of Gavai brothers were beyond recovery. I had asked renowned ophthalmologist Dr M.C. Modi to examine the Gavai brothers. After examination, he said that the eyes were not merely smashed but pulled out of their sockets, and hence restoration of eyesight was not possible. We could not restore the eyesight of Gavai brothers, but Naik, who had estimated the value of their eyes at Rs 1,000, had to bite the dust.

Baban Lavhatre probably was not aware of the effort that Dhale and I had made. He went around taking the credit, thereby spreading disinformation and deceiving himself. It was his habit. For instance, he wrote that I had led Vasant Dhamankar's funeral procession. I was in jail at the time.

Black Republic Day and torch march

The first martyr of the Dalit Panther movement, Bhagwat Jadhav, who was killed during the Worli riots, was a resident of Sheth Motishah Lane (known as Love Lane). On his first death anniversary, on 10 January 1975, all key Dalit Panthers from Mumbai met in his locality. While paying tributes, Raja Dhale said that the real tribute to Jadhav would be to continue with the struggle against casteism with renewed vigour. He urged those who believed in Hindutva to try and understand the movement of Mahatma Phule and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, and to realize their mistake. He pointed out that it was a cruel joke to say that the Dalit movement against casteism was hurting the sentiments of Hindus.

While addressing the meeting I said that the government had already revealed that it was a supporter of casteist forces by mercilessly beating up Dalits who were peacefully demonstrating against injustice. I said that the system that killed Bhagwat Jadhav ambushed us in a guise of bravery. Bhai Sangare criticized Republican leaders for not bothering about Jadhav's death and instead celebrating the unification of their factions.

Meanwhile, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna, had issued an order against displaying photographs of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in the government offices of the state. His action had provoked strong criticism from us, with Avinash Mahatekar and Narayan Gokhale publicly denouncing Bahuguna and asking him to refrain from such things.

In the meeting held to commemorate martyr Jadhav, we resolved to observe the Republic Day (26 January) as "Black Repub-

lic Day". S.R. Jadhav, Umakant Randhir, Prahlad Rokde and Manokush Malinkar (Manohar Ankush) strongly supported this decision. We held public meetings in various places like Bhimnagar (Panjrapol) and Gautamnagar to spread the word. Dhale informed audiences in various meetings about this decision. Several Dalit Panthers, including Dayanand Mhaske, Vitthal Sathe, Ramdas Athawale, Suresh Sawant, M.S. Andherikar and Kishore Narawade (from Aurangabad) and I, supported this idea.

Avinash Mahatekar, the general secretary of the Dalit Panther, issued a statement that the 25 years of the republic had been the black rule of a government indulging in atrocities against Dalits. A torchbearers' march was planned at Azad Maidan and flag-hoisting ceremonies were to be opposed.

On 25 January, at midnight, we converged on Azad Maidan to take out a torchbearers' march, but police personnel used brute force to prevent us from doing so. The police not only stopped us from taking out the march but also put out our torches. They did not even let us shout slogans. It was the silver jubilee of the Indian republic, but the power had not passed on to the public. It had remained concentrated in the hands of a few selfish and wicked people. It was only a make-believe republic. Finally, we marched silently towards Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's statue at the bandstand, where we held a rally. Avinash Mahatekar, Bhai Sangare, Ramdas Athawale, Arun Kamble and I addressed the rally.

The next day, on 26 January, we held a public meeting at Siddharth Nagar, Chembur. Dhale said that Dalits would treat every Republic Day as Black Republic Day till the provisions in the Constitution were entirely implemented. Bhai Sangare, Vitthal Sathe, Avinash Mahatekar, Arun Kamble, M.S. Andherikar, Pradnyawant Gautam (from Kolhapur), Arvind Ingle (from Akola), Bhaskar Ambawade and I spoke on the occasion. Bapusaheb Agalgaonkar presided over the meeting. After this meeting, we tried to take out a torchbearers' march, but again the local police under the leadership of Assistant Commissioner of Police Lohar stopped us using brute force. The Republic Day passed away in darkness without decorations or illuminations. However, it kindled the torches of

identity in the minds of the people.

The police department's report did not mention our attempt to take out torchbearers' marches on 25 and 26 January, for it would have revealed that the police's high-handedness had prevented a democratic march and that Dalits had observed the Republic Day as a Black Day. The intelligence report on the meeting to observe the death anniversary of Bhagwat Jadhav stated that I had told the police that one day they would have to work under the Dalit Panthers, while Mahatekar reportedly said that the Dalit Panthers would not allow the chief minister to hoist the national flag. The report also mentioned that Raja Dhale had criticized the practice of saying prayers and performing rituals in front of pictures of gods and goddesses at police stations. It was a deliberate attempt to stoke up an anti-Dhale feeling. It is known that in police stations while police officials perform the puja, they shut their eyes to anything that happens, because they have surrendered before their god. The police officials wanted to malign the Dalit Panthers with these false reports. But such reports never tarnished our image.

Apart from in Mumbai, Dalit Panthers in several other cities and towns observed the Republic Day as a Black Day, including in Nanded, Kandhar, Kamthi, Nashik, Malegaon and Pune.

A Republican on Panthers' stage

The merging of the three factions of the Republican Party of India on 26 January 1974 had raised the expectations of Dalits. But the Republican leaders wasted the whole year reorganizing their own factions while claiming that the unity was intact. The major bone of contention was whether to support the Congress party or oppose it. Hence, when the presidential election was announced, Gavai stood by the Congress, while Khobragade took the opposite stand, triggering the schism.

During the Worli-Naigaon riots, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar had "roared" that he was the cub of a lion and that the Dalits would fight back. It had made all stakeholders pause and take note and the riots had subsided. While other Republican leaders criticized the Dalit Panther, Bhaiyyasaheb supported us, thereby increasing our respect for him. We were thinking of getting Bhaiyyasaheb to join us onstage for one of our meetings as an answer to the political tactics of other Republican leaders.

On the occasion of the martyrdom day of Bhagwat Jadhav and Ramesh Deorukhkar, we organized a public meeting in the Dr Ambedkar Memorial Hall of the Bouddhajan Panchayat Samiti in Parel on 10 January 1975 and invited Bhaiyyasaheb to be our chief guest. He readily agreed. Speaking at the meeting, he described the Ambedkarite movement as a movement that had achieved extremely difficult tasks. He said that people like Bhagwat Jadhav and Ramesh Deorukhkar had sacrificed their lives fearlessly without any selfish expectation. He added that Dalit leaders were running hither and thither for personal gains, and asked whether it

would benefit the Dalit masses. He noted that some leaders had created their own groups to enhance their personal status and fiefdoms, while totally ignoring the community. He recalled that when the Dalit Panther was formed, initially he had said "God save us", but later he found the alchemy of Babasaheb in it. He sought the support of the youths and said that with Dalit Panthers around, the Ambedkarite movement would not go astray. He had grown old and would not last long, he said, but the responsibility of Babasaheb's movement would be on our shoulders. He asked us to toughen up to shoulder the responsibility.

It was an emotional speech and an emotional moment for us. We went on to support him till the end of his life. *Nava Kaal* patted us on the back in its editorial by saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." It was a dig at Ghanshyam Talwatkar and people like him. Bhaiyyasaheb had helped his colleagues, arranged marriages for them, provided houses and raised their status but they betrayed him. In one of the Lok Sabha elections, when he was left alone, Raja Dhale and I shouldered the responsibility of his poll campaign. He lost the election but gained his place in the minds of the people. After his death, we have always been there for his son Prakash, alias Balasaheb Ambedkar.

Raja Dhale also spoke at that meeting held in memory of the martyrs. He said that all Republican leaders had switched loyalties depending on their convenience but Bhaiyyasaheb had remained committed to the Ambedkarite movement. When it was my turn to speak, I said that we had nothing against the Republican leaders who adhered to Babasaheb's philosophy but that we were opposed to those working against it and dividing the movement for personal gains. I added that if Republican leaders actually started taking up Babasahab's unfinished work, we would be ready to disband the Dalit Panther. While summing up, Dhale, who presided over the function, said that history had made us slaves, but the time had come to reverse the relation and enslave history. The meeting sent chills down the Republican leaders' spines.

Yet another bonfire – of Gandhiji's book

A pretence of working towards eradicating casteism had become second nature to the Maharashtra government. One of Mahatma Gandhi's much-publicized programmes was the upliftment of Harijans. The word "Harijan" was not an official term, because Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had vehemently opposed it in the Bombay legislature in 1937. One of his close lieutenants and MLA, Bhaurao Krishnarao, alias Dadasaheb Gaikwad, had asked Gandhiji and his followers, "If we are children of Hari (God), then are you children of the devil?"

Gandhiji launched the "Harijan" movement to usurp Babasaheb's contributions. The Congress government began celebrating Harijan upliftment in memory of Gandhiji for a fortnight every year. However, in 1975, the government dedicated the fortnight to the memory of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Maharashtra government declared that a "Harijan fortnight" would be celebrated from 14 April (the birth anniversary of Babasaheb) to 1 May. The government said that casteism was rampant in rural areas and its focus would be on eliminating the practice. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had told the Congress party that he would have no objection to being called a Harijan if Dalits were treated on a par with the others. He had pointed out that Dalits were called children of God, but exploited in the name of caste. Still, the government named its "Harijan" campaign after Babasaheb.

We met Chief Minister Shankarrao Chavan and discussed the

issue for about 40 minutes. The delegation included Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare, Vitthalrao Sathe, Ramdas Athawale, Ramesh Kamble, Suresh Sawant and me. We urged him not to link the Harijan campaign to Babasaheb. We also condemned the practice of applying a draconian law like Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) against Harijans, sparing those who had committed atrocities against them. Devji Mohite from Khar and Madhu Belare, Dalit Panthers from Matunga Labour Camp, grilled Chavan on the biased use of MISA, following which Chavan promised that it would also be made applicable to those committing atrocities against Dalits.

However, when we realized that the government was hell-bent on sticking to its Harijan fortnight, we issued a statement. We accused the government of pretending to eliminate the caste system by undertaking such a superficial campaign, instead of drawing up a concrete action plan to end casteism, which had been in practice for thousands of years. We announced that we would disrupt the government programme.

We planned to burn Gandhiji's writings as a sign of protest against his ideology. Athawale and I issued a statement saying that we would burn Gandhiji's writings on 29 April at Azad Maidan to condemn the "Harijan fortnight" campaign. We planned to march from Azad Maidan to Hutatma Chowk, the venue for the event.

When the day came, hundreds of Dalit Panthers converged at Azad Maidan, sporting headbands with "Dalit Panther" written on them. Police personnel were present in large numbers. We were prepared for a showdown. Vitthalrao Sathe, Arun Kamble and Ramdas Athawale were present. Around 4.30pm, I stood on a handcart and delivered a short speech on the Harijan campaign of the government and Gandhiji's support to Hindu traditions like casteism. I opened a book written by Gandhiji, read a few lines and pointed out the Gandhiji was casteist. The audience applauded. We shouted slogans hailing Babahsaheb. I instructed them on slogans that condemned Gandhiji and the government. Then, I got down from the handcart amid sloganeering by Dalit Panthers.

Sathe, Kamble, Athawale were around me as I took out a match-

J.V. Pawar is arrested for publicly burning one of Gandhiji's books at Azad Maidan in Mumbai on 29 April 1975.

box from my pocket. I lit a matchstick and held the copy of Gandhiji's book over it. As soon as the flame touched the pages of the book, around six police personnel pounced on me. We resisted them for about four to five minutes and then they overpowered me and pushed me into a police van even as I continued resisting and shouting slogans. I was alone in the van with about 15 policemen. They took me to the Azad Maidan Police Station. Later, several other vans arrived with the arrested Dalit Panthers, including Sathe, Kamble and Athawale. Our sloganeering became louder at the police station.

The police officers noted our names. A few of us were taken to the duty officer. We were then taken to the senior officer's cabin, where the local deputy commissioner of police was present. We were served tea. Sometime later, we were released because the police officials did not want to spend money on our dinner. We were transported in vans to the Victoria Terminus railway station (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus). We had succeeded in burning Gandhiji's book in public. Besides, we had already asked our district units to agitate against the "Harijan" campaign. Marches

and public meetings were held in several districts, including Nagpur, Osmanabad, Nanded and Aurangabad, to condemn the government.

Before we publicly burnt Gandhiji's book, I had called a press conference on April 28 in Mumbai to inform the newspapers. The intelligence report submitted to the government on the press conference and the burning of Gandhiji's book stated that I had accused Gandhiji of being the No 1 enemy of the country and of supporting the Varna system. The report stated that the burning of the book was to unify the country on the issue. Dhale was quoted as saying that Indira Gandhi, despite being a secular prime minister, was generously donating funds to temples in southern India. The intelligence report also claimed that after announcing that the writings would be burnt at Hutatma Chowk, J.V. Pawar tried carrying out the act at Azad Maidan but didn't succeed because only 25 youths were present. The report added that the police arrested Pawar and 14 others. It was obvious that the police report was doctored to demonize and discredit us. Newspaper photographs, especially the one published in *Blitz*, and the names in the register of the Azad Maidan Police Station were proof that hundreds of youths had participated in our agitation.

Meanwhile, the issue of atrocities against Dalits had been discussed in the legislative assembly. Speaking on the issue, the social welfare minister, Pratibhatai Patil, lamented that untouchability would not be removed without the support of the people. Countering her, MLA Keshavrao Dhondge said that unless holy texts like *Manusmriti* were burnt and their influence on the minds of people was erased, there would be no social revolution. The Dalit Panther had already burnt a holy text and Gandhiji's writings.

Dalit Panthers outside Maharashtra

The Worli riots made headlines beyond the boundaries of Maharashtra. The news reached the other states as newspapers of all languages took note. It created awareness about casteism. Those who wanted to fight it started writing letters to us because they felt the need of a movement like the Dalit Panther in their respective state. We, too, wanted to have a broader base and volunteers from all states and linguistic groups for the march of 100,000 people that we had planned to hold in Delhi.

While interacting with people from other states, Raja Dhale and I could converse in English. Namdeo Dhasal and Avinash Mahatekar were good orators, but English-speaking was their weak point. Besides, Mahatekar was employed and it was not possible for him to stay away from work. I was required to remain in Mumbai because of the hostilities between Dalit Panthers and the Shiv Sena workers. Despite these handicaps, we could set up the Dalit Panther in states like Gujarat, Delhi, Madras (now Chennai), Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab and even abroad – in London, where it was named the Dalit Panther of India.

Here, I wanted to write the history of the Dalit Panther movement in all states, but given the enormity of such a task and its limitations, I have left it to each of them to write their own histories. However, it is necessary to skim over them.

Dalit Panther in Gandhiji's Gujarat

We wanted the Dalit Panther to spread to all states of India because casteism exists everywhere and the influence of religion

compels Dalits of all states to lead a life of slavery. Maharashtra's tradition boasts revolutionary leaders like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar who shattered the traditional system. Gujarat was exactly the opposite. Gujarat was the home state of Gandhiji and Gandhiji, along with the Congress, was the most influential political force in the country, because of which the Ambedkarite movement could not grow roots. Gandhiji was a supporter of Varna system while Babasaheb was totally against it. Gandhiji and Babasaheb were always at loggerheads over various issues. Gandhiji's followers outnumbered those of Babasaheb for obvious reasons, but Babasaheb was not an "Untouchable" for Gujarat. The Republican Party of India had made inroads in Gujarat, albeit with its factions and groups.

Some progressive-minded people of Gujarat had come together and one of them, Parmar, turned up at my house one day early in the morning. Newspapers in Gujarat had highlighted the activities of Dalit Panthers, especially the Worli incident, and the locals had felt the need of a similar movement there. During the course of our discussion, I realized that Parmar was a communist. Over a cup of tea, he invited us to Gujarat. We too were looking at ways of broadening the base of our organization.

Parmar used to be out of Gujarat most of the time. He gave me two names – Naran Vora and Bakul Patel. Patel was already working for the Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasabha. Parmar gave me their addresses and our correspondence began. They told me that the youths of Gujarat were eager to establish an organization like the Dalit Panther. I was told that there were thinkers who wrote about the Dalit Panther in the newspapers and weeklies. They were leftists. One of them was Prof Dave who lived in the Ellis Bridge area of Ahmedabad. We knew that these people were communists, but we thought of cooperating with them as a strategic move. They extended a hand of friendship and we accepted it.

This does not mean that people like Vora and Patel were hardcore communists. Their "red" ideology had already faded because of the influence of Gandhiji and its own limitations. They invited us for the Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations in Ahmedabad on 14

April 1974. Raja Dhale, Bhai Sangare and I left Mumbai for Ahmedabad a day earlier. We were scheduled to deliver lectures at different places in Ahmedabad over three days. The organizers had insisted that Namdeo Dhasal come with us, but Dhasal refused. We took the train from Mumbai, but our visit was kept a secret. We were asked to alight at Anand instead of Ahmedabad. From the Anand station, we were taken to our hotel.

The venue of our first meeting was an open ground in the Cotton Mill area of Ahmedabad. Many people, young and old, met us at the hotel. One of them was Rameshchandra Parmar, who was an office-bearer of the Khobragade faction of the Republican Party of India. I could speak some Gujarati because my residence in Mumbai was in the Mahalaxmi-Mumbai Central area. Rameshchandra Parmar and I discussed several things, although we were not particularly keen on a long conversation – because it was known that we used to publicly abuse Republican leaders. We went to the venue of the public meeting. The ground was full of people and there was heavy police deployment, like in our public meetings in Mumbai. Perhaps, the Mumbai police had alerted their Gujarat counterparts of our arrival.

A march was taken out before the public meeting. Addressing the meeting, Dhale said that Dalits would continue to be massacred till a comprehensive struggle was launched. He pointed out that casteism was responsible for the economic woes of Dalits and stressed the need for Dalits across the country to unite for a caste struggle. I spoke about the need to abandon outdated things to create a new society. I pointed out that people were interested in combating corruption, which was just a few decades old, but they were not uttering a word against 3,500-year-old casteism. I also said that it was impossible to create a judicious society without annihilating casteism and that the Dalit Panther would pave the way for it. Bhai Sangare attributed the woes of Dalits to Gandhism. He said that Gandhism had stunted the progress of the country and that it had to be destroyed and replaced with Ambedkarism.

After the first public meeting, there were smaller meetings in Dalit colonies. The outcome of these meetings was that Rameshchandra

Parmar quit RPI's Khobragade faction and joined the Dalit Panther. The Gujarat unit of the Dalit Panther, which was launched from Ahmedabad and Surendra Nagar, went on to expose Gandhism's darker side. Soon, branches were opened in several parts in the state. Parmar, who was starved of manpower when he was in the Khobragade faction, now had enthusiastic youths by his side.

The Gujarat Dalit Panther was taking up cases of atrocities against Dalits and also fighting for some basic issues like political reservations. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted political reservation for Dalits but only for 10 years. He himself was a victim of a reservation system in which any parasite could contest a reserved seat and get elected with the support of a mainstream party. Such elected representatives were servile to their political masters in the Congress party and had no voice of their own. The Gujarat Dalit Panther launched an agitation to demand that political reservation be scrapped. Since he had been in the Republican Party, Parmar knew the status of such reserved seats. He announced a burning of a chair on 25 December 1974 to coincide with the anniversary of the burning of the *Manusmriti* by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar in Mahad in 1927.

For this symbolic burning of the chair to protest against political reservation, he invited us to Gujarat again. By then, Namdeo Dhasal had broken away from us and other leaders did not have time. So, M.D. Gaikwad and I left for Gujarat on December 24. After participating in the burning the chair, I said that political reservation was a ploy of the Congress to strengthen its power and that it had kept Dalits off power.

One of the outcomes of the Dalit Panther coming to Gujarat was the growth of Dalit literature. More and more authors across the state started writing poetry, short stories, novels and autobiographies, creating a parallel narrative in the realm of Gujarati literature. Revolutionary poet Jeev Patel was a product of the movement. These writers first negated Gandhism and made efforts to sow the seeds of Phule-Ambedkar thoughts.

A lot can be written about the Gujarat Dalit Panther. I had written about it in my letters to the Gujarat unit chief Rameshchandra

Punjab Dalit Panthers at a protest march

Parmar while stating my linguistic limitations. He told me that he was writing a book in Gujarati on the Gujarat Dalit Panther's birth and evolution. Pakidye from Delhi and S.L. Birdi from Punjab have also undertaken the documentation of the Dalit Panther movement in their respective states.

Hoisting flag in the national capital

We were worried about the fate of our plan to take out a march of 100,000 youths in the national capital, Delhi. We did not have any chhawni in or around Delhi. I was going to visit Delhi but I did not know anyone there. Some newspapers and weeklies were indeed publishing articles on us. One such weekly was *Mainstream*. Two columnists, one from *Mainstream* and the other from *Frontier*, had contacted me before writing articles, but we had never met. Nevertheless, I set out to explore Delhi.

A colleague from Sewree, Bhimnath Jadhav, and I left Mumbai for Delhi. On reaching Delhi in the morning, we freshened up and went to the house of the *Mainstream* columnist. He had written a column in the "Dalit Literature" supplement of *The Times of India* dated 25 November 1973, quoting some stanzas from one of my poems. When we reached his lavish house, he was reading newspapers. We realized that he belonged to upper caste and class. He recognized me after I introduced myself.

Whenever an activist visited Mumbai, I used to make arrangements for his stay and food. I thought that he would do the same. However, he did nothing beyond offering a cup of tea. I told him about our purpose of visiting Delhi, the Dalit Panther's expansion beyond Maharashtra and its taking root in Gujarat, and our plan for a broader base and a presence in Delhi. I wanted to introduce myself to Dalit groups in Delhi, so I requested him to provide me with some local contacts. He told me that there were many Dalit organizations in Delhi but not even one of them was worth mentioning. I realized that the columnist was steeped in the communist

ideology and hence aloof from the grass-roots Dalit organizations. He didn't give us information on any organization, but he did mention the name of a person.

Since our baggage was still with us, we went to a hotel we could afford and checked in. Then we visited the Dalit locality called Raigarpura where the person lived. On entering the area a whiff of the peculiar smell of leather being processed greeted us. We tracked down the person known to the columnist and told him about the purpose of our visit. When we told him that the columnist had sent us, he opened up. He revealed a strange interpretation of Buddha's philosophy, claiming that Buddha could not tolerate misery and was not able to find a way to overcome it, hence he sat helpless with his eyes closed. He said Marx, Engels and Mao were not like Buddha. I was speechless at his bizarre argument. Ultimately, he introduced us to some activists staying in Raigarpura and went away, saying that he had other important things to do. While talking to these other activists I realized that they did not like him.

Bhimnath Jadhav and I, accompanied by local activists, then met some other people. Whenever an activist accompanied us, we had to bear his expenses and to cut our daily expenditure on travel, food and lodging, we used to buy a daily bus pass. On a single ticket we could travel all over Delhi. However, getting a bus turned out to be very difficult. For hours together, buses wouldn't stop at the bus stops. We saw that the local people preferred to use their own vehicles, even a bicycle, having realized the futility of relying on public transport. Our daily bus pass was valid for 12 hours, but we ended up wasting several hours merely waiting for a bus. I was shocked at the state of public transport in the national capital. Delhi probably had the most unreliable public transport.

When I was telling some of the activists about the time we were wasting to travel from our hotel to the Dalit colonies, one of them, Rajendra Kumar, offered us the terrace of his house in a Dalit colony in Old Delhi to spend the nights. He gave us a *charpai* (bed) with a *godhadi* (thick multi-layered bed sheet) to sleep on. The godhadi had not been washed for a long time and was stinking. I remained awake for the better part of the night until the cool morn-

ing breeze swept over me and helped me sleep. We had stayed there for four days, but we hadn't met the women of the house. All of them, even old women, used to go around with a *ghungat* (the end of the saree pulled down over the face as a veil). The women who used to provide us with warm water for baths and tea and toast for breakfast only knew that we were "Bambaiwale" (from Mumbai).

Rajendra Kumar had a fascination with Mumbai and nursed a dream of visiting the city once in his lifetime. At the heart of this fascination was the world of Hindi cinema, of which Mumbai was at the centre. He used to think that since we lived in Mumbai, we must be mingling with filmstars like Dilip Kumar, Raj Kumar, Raj Kapoor or Meena Kumari every day. He found it hard to believe when I told him that I had seen film stars only once – at a premiere of their film. He wanted to see Dilip Kumar and if possible, talk to him. It was not possible for me to arrange it, yet I invited him to Mumbai. I was banking on an acquaintance working in the Jyoti studio at Nana Chowk in Mumbai. Rajendra Kumar was exhilarated.

Jadhav and I used to leave early in the morning and return at night to sleep. During our stay in Delhi, we met Suman, Bhagwandas, Shankaranand Shastri and the manager of Ambedkar Bhavan. The main activists in Delhi had come to know of our presence in the city and one day, Suman held a meeting of activists at the Ambedkar statue near the Parliament. Around 30 to 40 *babus* (white-collar government employees) were present. They accepted the stand of the Dalit Panther, but because they were government servants, they said, they wouldn't be able to work for us.

I wanted to start the work of the Dalit Panther in Delhi. Since relying on the government employees was futile, I decided to replicate the technique we used in Mumbai. In our early days, we used to go around like public criers, banging a metal plate to attract a crowd in Dalit localities. In Delhi, Jadhav started banging the metal plate with all his might. After enough people had gathered, I would stand on a stool and inform them about the Dalit Panthers and its need in Delhi. I used to tell them about our activities and the Worli-Naigaon riots. At the time, the rape of a young woman called

Sharda had shaken Delhi and left the youths shattered. I appealed to the youths to unite and fight for justice. It worked, and with their help, we were able to visit all the Dalit localities. These youths started working as Dalit Panthers, but I wanted the entire society to take note of it.

Meanwhile, I had met Subhadra Joshi, who used to publish the magazine *Socialist*. Somebody used to send me a copy of the magazine. It was very critical of the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh and appreciative of Dalit Panthers. When I went to her office to meet her, I met the editor, Goyal, who welcomed us. Later we met Subhadra Joshi. My companion Jadhav mistook Joshi for Indira Gandhi, because her clothes and hairstyle were similar to Gandhi's. We were asked to meet a lawyer in the Delhi High Court complex.

This lawyer was from Maharashtra and had contact with the Maharashtrian politicians in Delhi. Subhadra Joshi had asked me whether I was interested in meeting Indira Gandhi. She was acquainted with her. I told her that the purpose of my visit was not to meet Indira Gandhi and it would be a waste of time. I was interested in meeting the lawyer though. Finally, we met him. His name was Bapurao Pakidye. He lived in a luxurious house. Two things probably endeared me to him – I was a Maharshtrian and the one who had led Dalit Panthers during the Worli riots. Pakidye asked me to leave Rajendra Kumar's house and stay with him. Our problem of lodging was thus solved. Besides, he bore the expenses whenever we were together. I was happy because I was running out of money.

Pakidye knew many people from Maharashtra who were living in Delhi. We used to meet them during the day and visit Dalit colonies in the evening. Pakidye introduced me to N.S. Kamble, a member of parliament, but seeing his miserable condition I could tell that he would not be of any help. In Delhi, MPs are provided with houses where they can stay and meet with the people. The houses of MPs who work for the people are always crowded. Kamble's house was not only deserted, but he had apparently rented out a portion of the bungalow. Kamble's wife wanted us to have dinner with them, but we excused ourselves on the pretext of having al-

ready accepted a dinner invitation. Pakidye also introduced me to an artist named Pendharkar, who burst into tears while narrating the memories of Babasaheb Ambedkar. He said that he had spoken to Babasaheb on 5 December 1956, a day before he died. He recollected the funeral procession and cried like a child.

After meeting a lot of people, we were in a position to organize a public meeting, which we scheduled for 13 July in Mavlankar Hall. We had not printed posters even on July 12 and that made me nervous. But I had no idea how Delhi functioned. There was a company that used to paste posters in all important public places within two hours irrespective of the weather. When we approached this company, it did just that and by evening people returning from offices came to know of the meeting. Since people were curious about Dalit Panthers, those who read the posters conveyed the message to others.

When I, Bhimnath Jadhav, Pakidye and Laxminarayan entered the hall around 6pm, it was packed with people. Pakidye knew the important people among the audience and named them. Since offices of all political parties were in the same locality, members of the Jana Sangh, both the factions of communists, socialists, etc, were present. I spoke in my Mumbai Hindi dialect. Though I could not speak chaste Hindi, what mattered was to have been able to communicate the anguish of Dalits. Due to the presence of newspaper representatives, the meeting got wide publicity.

The Delhi unit of the Dalit Panther was formed. Both Pakidye and Laxminarayan became part of it. Later, the Dalits of Delhi picked Pakidye as the chief of the Delhi Dalit Panther simply because he hailed from Maharashtra. The Dalits of Delhi had this strange logic. They used to say that since Maharashtra had given them their saviour in Babasaheb Ambedkar, whatever Maharashtrians said had to be followed. They used to say that although they didn't get a chance to work with Babasaheb himself, they were privileged to work with those who were close to him. Because of this feeling towards Maharashtrians, even Republican leaders like Dadasaheb Gaikwad found supporters in north Indian states. While I wanted someone who was from Delhi or Haryana to lead our

Delhi unit, local Dalits supported Pakidye. He used to write to me every week. Gradually, Pakidye became so selfish and ambitious that he started using his position for political benefits. I started ignoring most his letters and took note of only the important ones. He wrote asking whether Dhale could visit Delhi, but I was suspicious about his intention and ignored him.

Rajendra Kumar was interested in visiting Mumbai, but he did not. Instead, Pakidye did. My house was too small to accommodate him and his family, so I asked M.D. Gaikwad to arrange for his stay at Tilak Nagar, Chembur. Pakidye's unmarried sister-in-law was with the family and because of her, Ramdas Athawale started behaving with me in a strange manner. Those days, at times, Athawale could be peculiar. I got a glimpse of that side of him during a public meeting. Athawale and Suresh Sawant used to go for public meetings and address them till we reached the venue. During one such meeting on a hill in Surya Nagar, Vikhroli (West), Dhale and I could hear him speak as we were approaching the venue. At this public meeting held to celebrate Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's birth anniversary, we were surprised to hear Athawale urging those searching for a groom for their marriageable daughters not to insist on someone who was employed, but go ahead if he was engaged in social work. Incidentally, Sawant and Athawale were both bachelors without jobs and were social workers. I was embarrassed that one of our activists was indirectly airing his personal woe of not getting a bride.

We asked Athawale to take Pakidye and his family for sightseeing in Mumbai. While doing so, Athawale fell in love with Pakidye's sister-in-law. Of course, this love was one-sided. Assuming that if I put in a word for him, Pakidye would consent to this marriage, Athawale told me that he was infatuated with the girl. I wasn't in favour of this relationship though. We all loved Athawale and we used to help him, paying for his college and even his daily expenses. When I was the president of the Dalit Panther and he, the secretary, we used to meet every day. Dhale and M.D. Gaikwad and I cared for him. He had faith in us. He was simple and spotless, but also modern. I don't know why, but I had a hunch that he should

not marry the girl and hence I told him I wasn't in favour of it.

Dhale and Pakidye knew each other and Pakidye used to say that Dhale was his distant relative. But Athawale did not dare to involve Dhale in it. The result was that Athawale became frustrated and started nursing a grudge against me. After this disagreement, his behaviour changed and he never spoke frankly with me. If he had married the girl, he might have remained indebted to me or become servile to Pakidye. He might have become a hen-pecked husband. But then he would have never become the leader to commit the crime of fastening the Dalit movement to the Congress party's doorstep and later, even of joining hands with Shiv Sena and the BJP. I do not know whether Athawale will admit to these things today, but it is a fact.

Sometimes I feel that if I had acceded to Athawale's request and he had married that girl, his political career would have been ruined, but a large section of Ambedkarites would have been saved of its servility to the Congress. I am a staunch opponent of the Congress, so sometimes I ask myself: Did Athawale form an alliance with the Congress party to take revenge on me?

The meeting of Dalit Panthers in Delhi was a success. Newspapers all over the country and abroad took note. We returned to Mumbai with the satisfaction of a mission accomplished. Clippings we received later from *Motherland*, *National Herald*, *Patriot* and *The Times of India* attested to our success.

The Dalit Panther in London

After the Worli-Naigaon riots were reported prominently in *The Times of India*, some youths in London came together to open a branch of the Dalit Panther in London. I received a letter addressed to "Dalit Panther, Bombay, India" from one Krishna Gamare, who had settled in London. He congratulated us for fighting against casteist forces and asked for information on Dalit Panthers. I sent my article, "Beyond Friendship", a copy of the memorandum we had submitted to Chief Minister Vasantrao Naik, and an article published by *Frontier*.

Gamare, with the help of fellow Indians like Mohanlal and A. Shivanandan in London, established the Dalit Panther of India (DPI) along the lines of the Republican Party of India. While Mohanlal became president, Gamare became secretary. Gamare used to live in London, but he would visit Mumbai. During one such visit in 1973, he invited us to meet him at Sea Green Hotel. We met him but discussed political issues instead of social issues. We realized that Gamare was interested in politics and we chose to avoid him. For about four months there was no communication between us, but after the Worli riots, he wrote a letter and our correspondence became more frequent. We knew him as a colleague of S.S. Gaikwad, but after getting this new identity as a leader of the Dalit Panther he started corresponding with important international leaders. He wanted the Dalit Panther to get support from revolutionary organizations across the world.

Gamare was fond of George Fernandes, the Indian socialist leader, and wanted Dalit Panther to form an alliance with him for

the elections. I wrote to Gamare reminding that the Dalit Panther was a social organization interested in transforming Indian society, not in electoral politics. He was helpless, but like A. Shivanandan, he started representing DPI in international conferences. Gamare was willing to raise the massive funds required for contesting elections. He said that he would organize a dance show to raise campaign money for elections. A dancer from Bandra, Mumbai, was going to perform, but I rejected the proposal.

Gamare had links with some international leaders, including some Black Panther leaders. He invited me for a conference in London. Shivanandan had signed the invitation. Some activists in London were going to bear my travel expenses, but visiting London was unaffordable for me. I gave up the idea because I had a salaried job and was in debt from buying a house. I urged Mohanlal, who was going to attend the conference, to voice the plight of the 20 percent of India's population.

Mohanlal and Gamare used to react to every major development that took place in India. For instance, they had issued a statement congratulating Muthuswamy for resigning from the Tamil Nadu Cabinet. While working for DPI in London, Gamare used to invite the wrath of some Indians like Khobragade, Hirekar and the Heer family. Many Maharashtrians and Punjabi families settled in London had an attachment with the RPI, but the Dalit Panther was at loggerheads with them. Hence, there used to be differences between the Republican supporters in London and the DPI to the extent that sometimes, complaints used to be filed with the Indian High Commission against Gamare and Mohanlal. Gamare did not organize any agitations on the streets of London but he was instrumental in publicizing the activities of Dalit Panthers among the people of the United Kingdom and the Black Panthers in the US, through international conferences and celebrations of birth anniversaries of Dr Bahasaheb Ambedkar and Buddha. Gamare was, however, fickle and was not fully with Dalit Panthers. When we disbanded the Dalit Panther, he became inactive.

The Black Panther, US

A radical organization was formed in the 1960s in the United States, inspiring slaves across the world to fight slavery. It introduced those living in primitive ghettoes to a new way of life. It was called the Black Panther and its goal was Black Power.

This revolutionary organization made people the world over marvel over its activities. The Black Panther movement, within a short period from 1967 to 1969, drew attention of all revolutionary groups around the world. Though the period of its greatest influence lasted just a few years, it left historians shattered and manifested the might of a movement. The Black Panther was formed on 15 October 1966 in the US and the Dalit Panther was born in 1972 in India. They had many similarities, though they were not contemporaries. The first was at its peak from 1967 to 1969 and the second from 1972 to 1974. The first fought against racism, the second, against casteism.

An African American has distinct physical features – his complexion, hair and lips – and can be easily identified. That is not so with India's Untouchables – they look similar to the others. However, their caste, which sticks to them throughout their lives like his shadow, segregates them from the others. Once an Untouchable is identified, he has to face humiliating treatment. The battle against this invisible caste system is more difficult than the battle of African Americans against racisin. A black man cannot change his colour, but a man considered touchable can be branded as an untouchable. His grief is greater than that of a black man. Caste hides and can be concealed.

Both the Blacks and the Untouchables are slaves. The slavery of the Blacks dates back to hundreds of years ago, while that of the Untouchables dates back to thousands of years ago. Untouchability is a chronic disease flowing through the veins of the people. The starting point of slavery of the Blacks is the year 1607, when they were brough from Africa to America as slaves. The slavery of four centuries has ended because of the revolutionary movement of the Black Panther. Today, only in the US, the former slave has become powerful in all respects.

The untouchability in India originates from religion and hence the theocracy has been successful in sustaining it for centuries. The caste system operates openly as well as in disguise. To eradicate it, it is necessary to annihilate the divine sanction given to it. Since an average Indian is a religious person, they become supporters of the caste system. Reformers strive for improvement while keeping the basic framework intact. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had criticized such reformers. He asked why Voltaire was not born in India. There is no answer to that question. The slavery in America was outlawed in 1865 but racism did not end. The untouchability in India was outlawed in 1950 but the divine sanction of Manu (in "Purush Sukta" of *Rig Veda*, a holy text of Hindus) for casteism is so influential that it exists at all levels.

From its inception, the Black Panther took an aggressive stand, including adopting the policy of taking up arms if necessary. The Black Panther declared that it would launch an armed struggle to fight racism and gender discrimination, because of which the American government became dictatorial in suppressing the movement. The government enmeshed the Black Panther leadership by booking them under inhuman charges.

The Black Panther announced its Ten-Point Program. In the sixth point, they said that they wouldn't enrol in the defence services to protect America and if compelled they would defend themselves from the American police and army by picking up arms. The last point said that the Black Panther would give land to the landless and food, shelter and clothes to the needy and that education would be a fundamental right and the ultimate goal would be to establish peace.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) submitted a report to the US government that described the Black Panther as the biggest threat to internal security. The report gave the government the licence to suppress the movement. In India, false cases were registered against Dalit Panther leaders and efforts were made to ensure that they did not get respite from court and jails. Other Dalit activists were killed in fake "encounters" (gunfights) and others still were killed while they were asleep. All these things were done

to stifle the Dalit Panther movement.

The American government had branded every Black Panther leader as a terrorist and anti-national, while the Black Panther said that every human being was born free and that the government had no right to curb their freedom. The white people did not give freedom to the Blacks, hence the Black Panther prohibited the entry of white people in the organization. In 1972, reforms were introduced – for example, there would be no discrimination against anyone on the grounds of race and lineage while employing them. It set the ball rolling for the participation of African Americans in the government machinery. The year when America became liberal, the Dalit Panther was established in Mumbai and started giving jolts to the government. The American government put the Black Panther leaders in prison. Likewise, the Maharashtra government prosecuted the Dalit Panther leaders under section 153(a) of the Indian Penal Code (for promoting enmity on the grounds of religion, caste, etc) and controlled their leadership. All of the Dalit Panther leaders, including Raja Dhale and Namdeo Dhasal, faced prosecution. Dhale was named in the largest number of cases.

The character of the leadership is very important in any movement. The Black Panther leaders did not pay attention to this crucial aspect of a movement. Many took to drugs, perhaps as a status symbol, thus becoming a bad influence on many of their supporters. Consequently, the initial "army" discipline in the organization withered away. The leaders who were talking about using arms to protect people started using arms in internal squabbles. Corruption became rampant and misappropriation of funds increased. In short, some leaders turned out to be immoral. They lost their moral standing and credibility, because of which the organization collapsed. Yet their struggle from 1967 to 1969 resulted in the eradication of the 400-year-old slavery. Many lost their loved ones, others sacrificed everything they had and many still were killed. Ultimately, the Blacks became powerful. It appears that their dream of "Black Power" has become a reality.

The slogan of Dalit Panthers in India was "Power to Dalits", modelled on the Black Panther slogan. Today, whenever an atrocity

like "Khairlanji" takes place (the 2006 massacre of four members of a Dalit family, including two women, in Khairlanji village, in Maharashtra's Bhandara district), a demand is made for a militant organization like the Dalit Panther. This shows the importance of the struggle of the Dalit Panther against casteist forces to provide justice to the common man. There are, of course, too many detractors of the Dalit Panther. They have the right to oppose it, but if they look beyond their prejudices, they will see that the Dalit Panther restored self-respect in a community that had been handicapped. The Dalit Panther movement gave a new lease of life to the slaves and thwarted the onslaught of wicked forces on the philosophy of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. In the early 1970s, communism was trying to gobble up the Ambedkarite movement and simultaneously, the Congress party was taking revenge by luring Republican leaders (who had inherited the legacy of Dr Ambedkar). If the Dalit Panther had not fought against these two forces, our critics would not have come into existence and would have continued to prop up the communist parties and the Congress party.

There is no book that tells Maharashtra's youths about the Black Panther. I am going to put together that book. It would again bring forth the glory of the Black Panther and the Dalit Panther, and then Panthers would be born in every house. They could give their organization any name, but the ultimate achievement would be to become a panther, to fight injustice. If that happens, not only would untouchability be eliminated but power, wealth and dignity would be at the feet of the Ambedkarite community. I am hopeful about that.

Retrieving Babasaheb's writings from oblivion

The community that reads is the community that survives. The community that does not read does not survive. It means that reading is important for a community for its stability and existence. This is what Babasaheb believed. It was thus necessary to publish the works of Babasaheb in all languages for the benefit of Dalits. Some of his books had been published but most of his writings had remained unpublished. The Maharashtra government was being requested through written pleas and public meetings to publish the unpublished works as well as those published but not available, but no decisive steps were being taken. The Dalit Panther prioritized this issue and insisted that the Maharashtra government publish all the writings of Babasaheb.

When the Dalit Panther took out its march on 14 August 1973, its delegation could not meet the chief minister because the state legislature was in session. However, later when the then chief minister, Vasantrao Naik, met us, we handed over a memorandum that was in the form of a booklet. Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhasal and I – the members of the delegation – took up each of the points mentioned in the memorandum for discussion. While discussing "Harijan fortnight" campaign and Gandhiji's writings, we pointed out how Gandhiji was a "dwarf" and his glorification of villages in the industrial world was deceptive, in contrast to Babasaheb's progressive ideas. We demanded that the Maharashtra government publish officially all of Babasaheb's writings to preserve and propagate his thoughts.

The unpublished writings of Babasaheb had been locked away and they could only be published with his wife Maisaheb Ambedkar's permission. It was publicly known that Maisaheb and Bhaiyyasaheb (Babasaheb's son) didn't get along with each other. Since they were Babasaheb's legal heirs, we had to bring them together and get their permission to pave the way for the publication of his writings. Meanwhile, I came to know that Maisaheb used to meet D.D. Baviskar (who used to lend a hand at Chaityabhoomi) at his house. I started meeting her at Baviskar's house. Raja Dhale and Diksha Dhale, too, met her. Some people criticized us and tried to create an impression that we had committed a crime. Anil Barve's weekly magazine published a photograph of Dhale with Maisaheb and criticized Dhale.

I was frequently meeting her and increasing rapport with Bhaiyyasaheb. Incidentally, the planning had begun for the celebration of Bhaiyyasaheb's 61st birthday to be held on 3 April 1976. The chief guest for the function was going to be the chief minister of Maharashtra, Shankarrao Chavan, and Maisaheb was also supposed to attend. Maisaheb asked me to convey to Yeshwant (Bhaiyyasaheb) that he should publicly acknowledge her presence on the stage. I gave her my word that Bhaiyyasaheb would do it. Then, I conveyed the message to Bhaiyyasaheb. He agreed. She just wanted him to express affection and accept her (as his mother).

When the felicitation function started, many colleagues of Bhaiyyasaheb were present on the stage. There were four rows of chairs and I was sitting in the last row, in the last chair, to offer it to any VIP arriving late. VIPs like Ghanshyam Talwatkar, D.G. Jadhav, B.H. Warale and P.T. Borale had occupied the first row, along with Shankarrao Chavan's wife Kusumtai, Bhaiyyasaheb's wife Meeratai and Maisaheb (Babasaheb's second wife). Some people on the stage started whispering to one another when they saw that Maisaheb was also seated on the stage. The audience was wondering who the third woman (Maisaheb) was.

Many speakers, including Chavan, extended their best wishes to Bhaiyyasaheb. When Bhaiyyasaheb rose to speak, I became anxious, because I wanted him to acknowledge the presence of Maisa-

heb. But I don't know what happened. He named all those present on the stage, but did not mention Maisaheb. Once the function concluded, as Maisaheb was walking down from the stage, she twisted my ear so hard that I had to stop myself from screaming in pain. She was angry, and I did not meet her for the next two weeks.

I wanted Maisaheb and Bhaiyyasaheb to be reconciled, but I had failed in my efforts. One bright sunny day, Baviskar came to my office, panting, with a message from Maisaheb that she wanted to meet me. Our meetings resumed. At the back of my mind was the need to get Babasaheb's writings published. Bansod, a lawyer from Nagpur, also felt that need and offered help. We felt that only if the chief minister took our request seriously, this would happen. On 17 January 1976, I met the chief minister as part of a delegation and requested him to publish Babasaheb's both unpublished writings and published but unavailable writings. Our delegation included Datta Jadhav from Kolhapur and Ramdas Athawale.

Shankarrao Chavan was not the kind of leader who would say "I will see", or "I will think over it". His main worry was which department of the government would publish it, because it would require releasing of funds. Finally, he zeroed in on the education department. Meanwhile, Balasaheb Ambedkar (Bhaiyyasaheb's son), Meeratai and Maisaheb gave their permission to the government to go ahead with publishing the entire writings and speeches of Babasaheb. The Maharashtra government formed "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Source Material Publication Committee" for the purpose. The chairman of the committee was the then education minister, Sadanand Varde, and the deputy chairman was R.S. Gavai, the deputy chairman of legislative council. It also included some Republican leaders. Vasant Moon was given the charge of compilation and editing.

The first volume was published on 14 April 1979, when Sharad Pawar was the chief minister. Among those in the committee were Dr Baba Adhav and Dr Kolte. Those who had pursued the demand since 1973, like Raja Dhale and me, were not included. People like Arun Kamble, who used to flatter Sharad Pawar, were appointed as members, too. Anyway, the reason we pursued the publication

of Babasaheb's writings was not to get ourselves appointed on the committee. Perhaps, we would have been made members, if, during the agitation to rename Marathwada University after Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, we had accepted the option of renaming it "Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University".

We were satisfied that the government was publishing Babasaheb's writings at its expense. The first volume contained 496 pages and was priced at just Rs 10, because of which the first edition was sold out very soon. In the series, 24 volumes have been published so far, which includes Babasaheb's speeches in Marathi; his periodicals *Mooknayak* and *Bahishkrut Bharat*; and a compilation of police reports. Shankarrao Chavan was initially worried about raising funds for publishing the volumes, but now the volumes are bringing in money for the government. As soon as a new volume is released, people have been queuing up to buy it. At times, the police have had to resort to lathi-charge, especially in Nagpur, to rein in the crowd of these readers.

Today, several other state governments have been publishing these volumes in their respective languages. Youths across linguistic groups have thus imbibed Babasaheb's ideas and been energized. Babasaheb is putting down roots in all states.

People have loved the volumes of Babasaheb's writings. In the 1980s, when the government released the fourth volume and some people objected to the "Riddles in Hinduism" that was part of it, over one million Babasaheb's followers took to the streets of Mumbai saying that they would not permit even a comma to be deleted from the volume. It was a new experience seeing so many people coming out in defence of an author and his writing. The government also had to listen to them.

I am fortunate enough to have Babasaheb's unpublished works published because of my good rapport with Bhaiyyasaheb and Maisaheb. The writings will prove in the near future that Babahsaheb is the only true global icon.

The Dalit Panther disbanded

The Dalit Panther had become a strong force. It was unsettling the government on the one hand and assuring the common man of a protective shield around them on the other hand. The common man, who was insecure and vulnerable, had become fearless because of the Dalit Panther. The leaders of the Dalit Panther had gained in stature in their respective districts and were hobnobbing with district collectors, district superintendents of police, heads of government offices and elected representatives. As a result, a trend of getting things done through officials started.

The birth of Dalit Panther was to eradicate injustice and atrocities, but because of the new trend, some taluka chiefs and district chiefs of Dalit Panthers were themselves perpetrating injustice against Dalits. In the past, Dalit Panthers had intervened in land-grabbing incidents and restored the land to the rightful farmers. Now, Dalit Panthers were getting involved in land deals. In the slums, Dalit Panthers used to provide strength to the oppressed, but eventually, some Dalit Panthers became slumlords and started dealing in creation of new slums and selling hutments. We came to realize that the Dalit Panther's image was changing from that of a protector to that of an oppressor. Some of our members had even started extorting money from bootleggers and those involved in other illicit businesses. In some places like Nanded, these things came to the fore because of protests, much to the surprise of the police department. Dalit Panthers had done these underhand deals with the connivance of local police and government officials. Eventually, the common man started whispering against the Dalit Panther.

These activities had not assumed a large scale. They were exceptions. But they were still proof that undesirable practices had crept into the organization. Every district had one or two such cases. The wheeling and dealing of Shantaram Jagtap was one such case. While speaking at a public meeting on 10 January 1976, I had said that the work of an organization was more important than its name and that, since we were Ambedkarites, we would not compromise with Ambedkar's philosophy at the cost of the organization.

At the time, general elections were announced across the country and the Janata Party was becoming popular. The Emergency, the excesses of the Congress leaders during the Emergency and Jaiprakash Narayan's agitation had turned the public sentiment against the government. All opposition parties had come together and formed the Janata Party to defeat the Congress party. The main constituent of the Janata Party was the Jana Sangh, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had entered the arena by deploying all its strength against the Congress. It was also as if *The Indian Express* newspaper group had accepted the contract of pulling down the Congress government.

I received a message that the Janata Party was interested in nominating Raja Dhale from the Nanded Lok Sabha constituency. There were also messages that I would be made a Cabinet minister once power was wrested from the Congress by non-Congress parties. N.P. Nikumbh, who was legal advisor to Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasabha, had conveyed these messages. He was also linked to a faction within the Congress party that was allied with the Janata Party and was one of the five members involved in policymaking. If we had accepted the proposal, S.M. Joshi, the socialist leader who was one of the founders of the Janata Party, might have kept his word. But we knew that this party would not last, because it had a one-point agenda and that was to oppose the Congress party. We neither trusted the Janata Party nor the government. The constituents of the Janata Party included those who were ideologically opposed to one another. Raja Dhale used to compare the Janata Party leaders imprisoned during the Emergency to Lord Krishna

born in prison, and raise doubts about their *Bhagvadgita* (the holy text in which Lord Krishna prepares warrior Arjuna to go to war against Kauravas in the epic *Mahabharata*).

The Congress party was our enemy, but we did not want to take the help of the Janata Party to fight against it. At the time, Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar was canvassing for the Lok Sabha election by promising reservations for Buddhists. All his colleagues had deserted him and he was fighting for concessions for Buddhists when the whole country was fighting to dethrone the Congress government. We declared our unconditional support for Bhaiyyasaheb. I was the election manager while Dhale was in charge of election propaganda.

Every day I used to go to "Raj Griha" (the Ambedkar residence) and then go to the Mumbai North-East Lok Sabha constituency for the poll campaign. The constituency included large slums in areas like Chembur, Vikhroli, Ghatkopar, Powai and Bhadup. Even preparing cards for individual voters was a gigantic task and beyond my capacity. Despite lack of money, manpower and resources, we did our best. The activists of Republican Party of India deceived us. Whenever we contacted them, they would promise their support for Bhaiyyasaheb, but once we turned our backs, they would throng the offices of the Shiv Sena and the Jana Sangh. We knew that we would not get their votes, and since they had lost their credibility, their word had no value.

When we supported Bhaiyyasaheb, Namdeo Dhasal was a campaigner of the Congress party under the Dalit Panther banner, while Bhai Sangare and Avinash Mahatekar were campaigning for the Janata Party. There were thus three different factions of the Dalit Panther campaigning separately for three different entities. We decided to disband the Dalit Panther to end the chaos and pull the rug from under the feet of the two factions indulging in bad practices.

We wanted the Dalit Panther to remain united. We didn't want factions. To clear our stand on supporting Bhaiyyasaheb and disbanding the organization, we planned to prepare a booklet for distribution among journalists at a press conference. We had already spoken to our important colleagues over dissolving the organiza-

tion. While some were in favour, others were against it.

We wrote the booklet in Ramdas Athwale's room at the Siddharth Vihar hostel, Wadala. Three people were involved in writing it – Dhale, Umakant Randhir and I. We did not want to be disturbed so I asked Athawale to lock the room from outside and then sent him to play football. Athawale was on our side and only he and Arun Kamble knew what we were up to in the room. Dhale dicated and Randhir wrote. I suggested corrections or alternate words, wherever necessary. Once the manuscript was ready, we asked Athawale to take the "press copy" to Krishna Karvar's printing press for printing. The booklet had Raja Dhale as the publisher Budhha and Bhushan Printing Press, Gokuldas Pasta Lane, Dadar, as the printer.

Copies of the booklet were circulated among journalists on 7 March 1977 and it was declared that the Dalit Panther had been dissolved. Gangadhar Gade from Aurangabad was also present for the press conference and he even replied to a couple of questions from the journalists. However, later, several of our colleagues like Gade, Randhir and Kamble claimed that they were not taken into confidence before disbanding the organization. Ramdas Athawale was not involved in the decision but he knew what was going on. Arun Kamble, on the other hand, had said that the Dalit Panther could be dissolved but the new organization to be formed should contain the word "Panther" because the word gave the movement a boost. I told him that we were capable of giving a boost to the new name too. Kamble suggested that the new organization be named "Apan Mass Panther". We were trying to do away with the word "Panther" and he was insisting on cashing in on it. The news of the press conference was published on March 8 in all newspapers.

The same day, a Marathi eveninger, *Sandhyakaal*, carried a statement signed by Uamakant Randhir, Arun Kamble, Ramdas Athawale and Dayanand Mhaske that they would continue with the Dalit Panther. Ironically, the booklet announcing the disbanding of the organization also named Gangadhar Gade, Ramdas Athawale and Dayanand Mhaske.

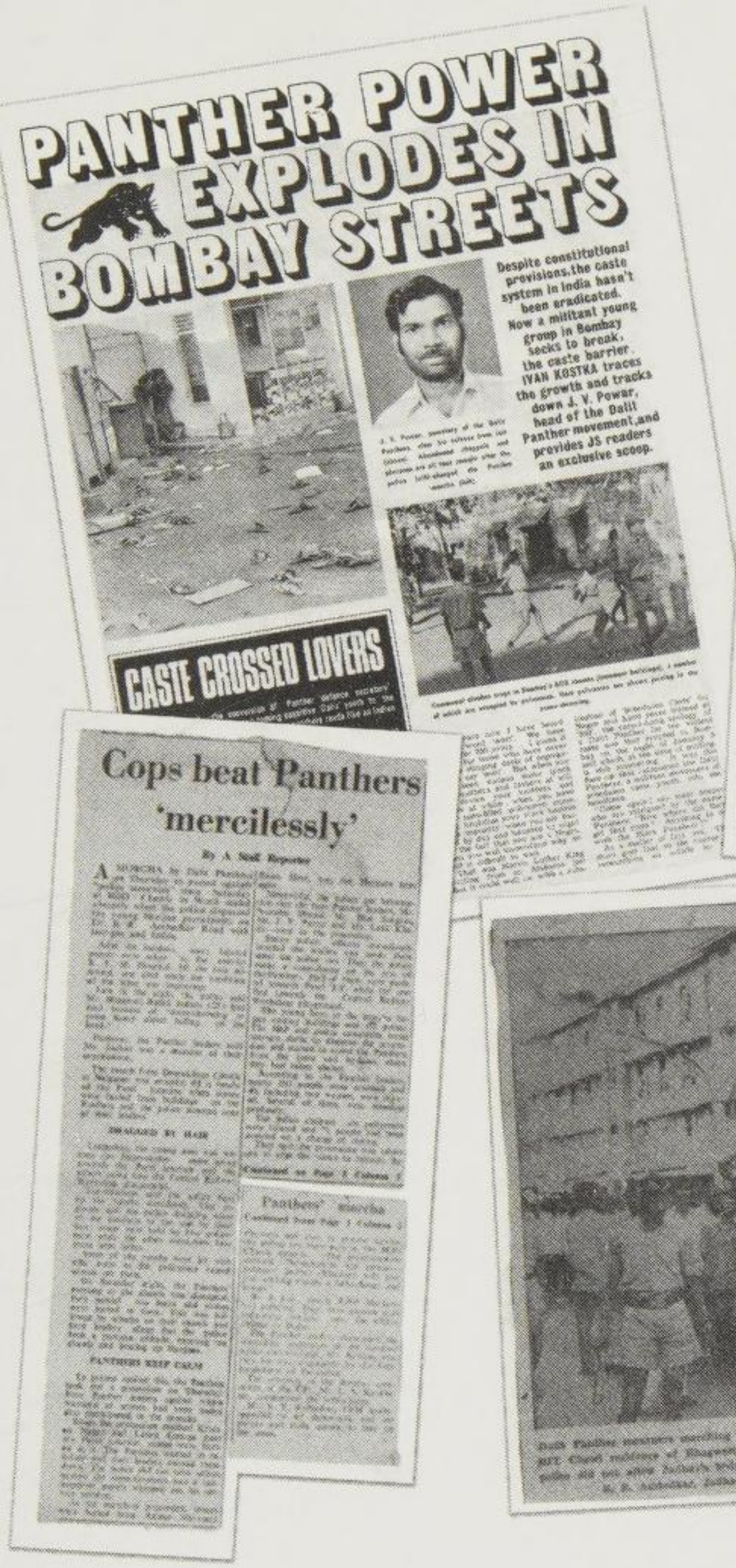
After the press conference, we headed straight to the election campaign of Bhaiyyasaheb Ambedkar. We wore wearing caps on which "Dalit Panther" was written on one side, and "Mass Movement" was written on the other. We had the caps on while we delivered speeches. We had no idea that Mhaske, Athawale and Kamble would switch loyalties. Athawale, too, had written in his diary's "To Do" list about visiting Mohan printing press at Sewree to collect booklets on the Dalit Panther's dissolution. Gangadhar Gade, who was with us during the press conference, later went against us.

When he was released on bail from prison, Gade had expected us to organize a public function to felicitate him. Gade had not been acquitted, but released on bail. The charges against him were of serious nature. He wanted his felicitation to be done at Bhadkal Gate, Aurangabad, to wipe off the blot on him. He had come to Mumbai to tell us that Dhale and I should attend the felicitation function. We asked him to be with us at the press conference but could not give him a date on which we could attend his function. Nevertheless, we met Chief Minister Shankarrao Chavan to explore the possibility of withdrawal of the baseless charges against him. Before we met Chavan, he had already asked to see the file on Gade. He told us that the charges were serious and expressed surprise that Dhale and I were supporting Gade. We told him that everything written on a government file was not always correct. However, we decided against attending the programme to felicitate Gade. It was one of the main reasons for Gade to go against us and support those who wanted to keep the Dalit Panther intact.

It was because of the name "Dalit Panther" that he had gained recognition as a slum "dada" (bully). Supporting our decision to dissolve the organization would have meant parting with the revenue from the slums. Gade could not do it.

After the organization was dissolved, some youths living at the Siddharth Vihar hostel met me and expressed their displeasure. One of them, Sumeet Kamble, started crying. Arvind Ingle, who was not happy with the decision, wrote a lengthy letter from Akola. The disbanding of the Dalit Panther had wiped out the pastures of some

of our members who were in the habit of using the letterhead of the organization to make money through illegal activities. Bhai Sangare's earnings through campaigning for the Janata Party dried up. The dissolution of the organization put an end to the immoral activities of many.


PANTHER POWER EXPLODES IN BOMBAY STREETS

Despite constitutional provisions, the caste system in India hasn't been eradicated. Now a militant young group in Bombay seeks to break the caste barrier. IVAN KOSTKA traces the growth and tracks down J. V. Powar, head of the Dalit Panther movement, and provides JS readers an exclusive scoop.

CASTE CROSSED LOVERS

Angry Panther mob gassed again

Cops beat Panthers 'mercilessly'

By A Staff Reporter

Panthers' attacks

Dalit Panther members marching to the Dalit procession, Dombivli, on Friday, one Friday from the Love Lane area. Dalit relatives of Bhagwan Dalvi, police who was killed in the clashes on Thursday. As the police did not allow Dalvi's body to be taken in procession, the members from the groups of

The Dalit Panther in the press

L 56/9

'JV is the encyclopaedia of the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement. One of the founders of the Dalit Panther, he never sought the limelight, unlike the others, but remained committed to the Ambedkarite Dalit movement and true to his own conviction.'

- Dr Anand Teltumbde

'JV is a movement himself. The activism in him will never tire. He is the Google of the Ambedkarite Movement.'

- Bhau Torsekar

'We created so many things but JV documented the movement. If someone other than us or JV had documented it, the history of the movement would certainly have been distorted.'

- Shahir Sambhaji Bhagat

'JV is one of the founding members of Dalit Panthers in India. Dalit Panthers were fiery, agitated and ever ready to stand for social justice and the dignity of Dalits and whoever else was being oppressed.'

- Yogesh Maitreya

'JV is a one-man live university of the Dalit movement.'

- Neelkanth Khadlikar

'JV Pawar is the second C.B. Khairmode of the Dalit movement.'

- Prof Avinash Dolas

'JV's poetry nullifies the attempts of those who reject Dr Ambedkar's mission and leadership and devalue his liberation struggle.'

- Raja Dhale

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